

**THE CHRISTIANISATION OF
ICELAND**
PRIESTS, POWER AND SOCIAL CHANGE
1000-1300

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation deals with the institutional development of the church in Iceland from the 11th century to the end of the 13th and the influence of the church on the development of secular power structures in the same period. It is concerned mainly with identifying and describing factors which explain how the Icelandic church was originally fostered by the aristocracy; how the chieftains' involvement with the church helped them consolidate their authority and accumulate more power; how the church only very slowly began to create its own identity and how class-consciousness among clerics developed.

The question of cult-continuity is considered and the sources for the history of the church in the 11th century are subjected to scrutiny. The importance earlier scholarship has attached to the early 12th century as a formative period of the Icelandic church is reconsidered. The introduction of the tithe in 1097 is discussed in detail and its significance subjected to reevaluation. Evidence for early church building is assembled and the development of ministerial organisation is described. Particular emphasis is attached to the definition of church-ownership in the 12th century and a new interpretation of the church's bid for increased control over ecclesiastical property in the late 12th century is presented. The social origins of the bishops are considered and their administration and political involvement is described. Emphasis is put on studying the changing social status of priests, from being mainly chieftains or influential farmers, to whom ordination was a means to augment their temporal authority, to becoming younger and illegitimate sons who by the mid 13th century had adopted an ecclesiastical identity and who differentiated between secular and ecclesiastical interests.

PREFACE

Professor Páll Skúlason said once in a lecture I attended as an undergraduate at the University of Iceland that the conversion to Christianity was the single most important event in the history of Icelandic culture. I found this remark rather incautious at the time, not only because it has as its premise an event about which we know next to nothing, but because of the implications it has for concepts like 'event', 'Christianity', 'culture', 'history' and 'Icelandic'. It did however push me off on, what has been for me, a highly enjoyable and fruitful journey, which I am hoping has resulted in some valuable new insights into high-medieval Icelandic society.

Páll's statement was naturally about the consequences of the conversion and it is perhaps sad that, having once been full of indignation over the frivolity of the generalisation, I now find myself agreeing with it. I would probably phrase my thoughts somewhat differently; I suspect Páll's concern was mainly the influence of the church on art, literature and ways of thinking and particularly the place of Icelandic culture in the framework of European cultural tradition. This to me is self-evident. What intrigues me is how the church influenced fundamental changes in the very fabric of Icelandic society in the high-middle ages. How both directly and indirectly it affected people's relations, the development of government and new forms of power.

My research for this dissertation has from the beginning centred on two issues. On the one hand I have studied the lives of Icelandic clerics in the 12th and 13th centuries. I designed a database where I assembled all the information I could find on clerics, their family, status, activities, political involvement and alliances. On the basis of this I wrote up the histories of some 98 families of clerics where I tried to solve genealogical problems and where I evaluated the local and regional influence of each family. Originally I intended this to appear as an appendix to this work, but I had to abandon that idea on account of the length of the piece. Much of chapter III 5 is based on this database and the family histories. On the other hand I spent much time and energy on researching the formation of the parish system. It was indeed the first part of the dissertation to be completed, but in the end I decided to put it aside on account of its length and its theme not being essential to the main thrust of the dissertation. There are, scattered through the present work, several confident statements relating to the parish system and pastoral care. These are based on this research and I beg the reader's indulgence if the necessary argumentation lacking. I am presently rewriting this treatise in Icelandic and am hoping it will appear separately under the title *Sókn og þing. Athugasemur á félagsmótun á Íslandi á miðöldum*.

My studies were made possible by financial assistance of the Lánasjóður íslenskra námsmanna and an Overseas Research Students Award. In 1994 I received grants from Sagnfræðisjóður dr Bjorns Þorsteinssonar and Kristnisjóður which made it possible for me to finish the writing of the dissertation.

Most of the research was carried out at the Scandinavian library in University College London library and I am indebted to the staff there for their helpfulness and tolerance with my queries for unheard-of books. In 1994 I spent valuable time at the Arnamagnæan Institute in Reykjavík and at the Arnamagnæan Commission's Dictionary in Copenhagen - the trip to Copenhagen was made possible by an award from the Graduate School of University College London. I am grateful for the excellent assistance of the staff at both institutes.

I have had the good fortune to be able to rely on a number of people for assistance and advice during the course of my research. My greatest debt is to my supervisor, Wendy Davies, who has been an inspiring teacher and a relentless rectifier of sloppy thought. My good friend and colleague, Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, has read several early versions of this work as well as the final product and I have benefited greatly from her unwaveringly constructive critique. As if the occasional pint with Peter Foote was not enough intellectual luck, the text of the dissertation, and many a translation, has greatly improved by his suggestions. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, Richard Perkins and Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson have all read the final version of the dissertation and I am grateful for their many comments and suggestions. Needless to say I alone am responsible for the mistakes.

Gudmund Sandvík and Dagfinn Skre both gave me copies of their books and I am beholden to them for their generosity. I am indebted to Mjoll Snæsdóttir, who taught me most of what I know about archaeology, for profitable discussions and help in acquiring material from Scandinavian libraries. I have for a long time attempted to lead a kind of double existence as an archaeologist as well as a historian and I am deeply thankful to Adolf Friðriksson for dragging me into the field every summer. This dissertation would have a very different shape if it were not for those experiences and the consistently fruitful discussions with Adolf. I am also grateful to Adolf, Mjoll and my other colleagues at the Icelandic Institute of Archaeology for allowing me to spend time on finishing this dissertation when I should have been working on other projects.

I would also like to thank my parents for their support and María Reyndal for coming into my life.

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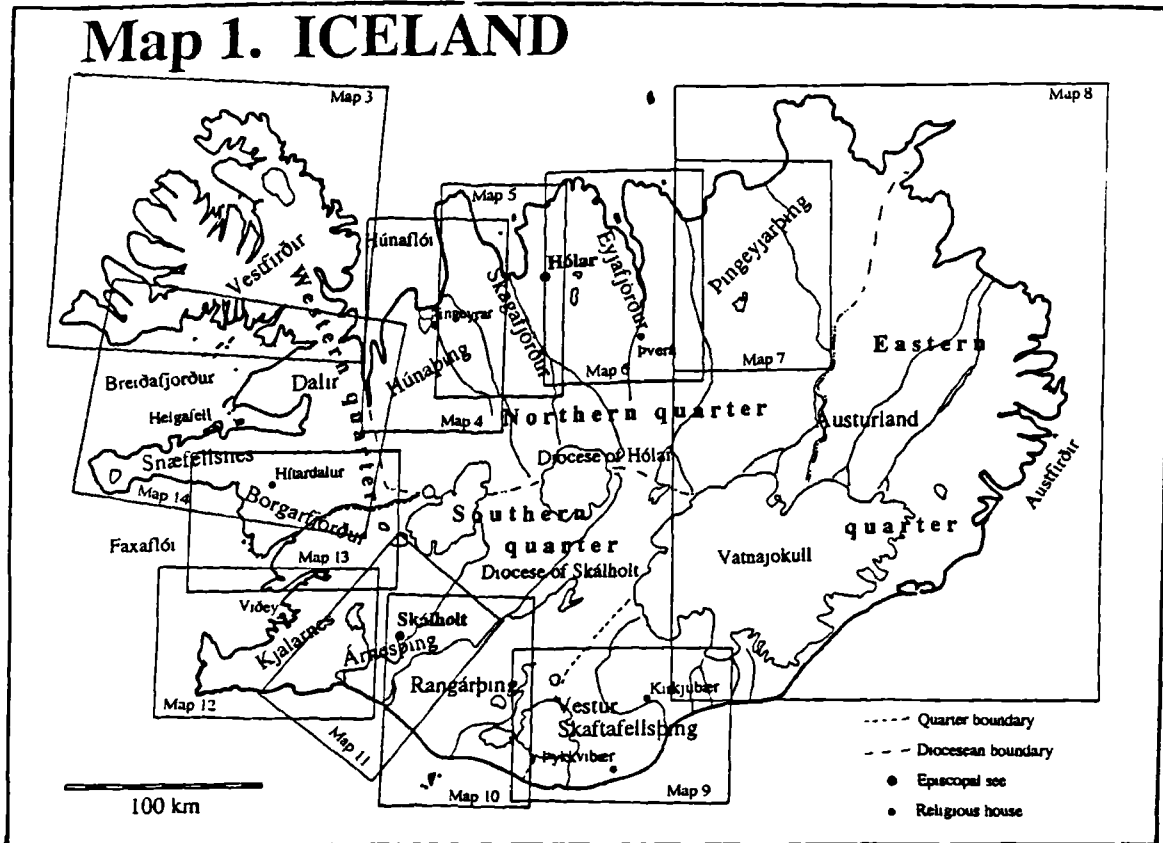
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ABBREVIATIONS

- A Austurland (see map p 334)
- Aarbøger *Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie*, København 1866-
- Adam *Magistri Adam Bremensis Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, ed B Schmeidler, 3rd ed., (Monumenta Germaniae historica Scriptores rerum Germanicarum), Hannover 1917
- AÍ *Alfræði íslensk: Íslandsk encyklopædisk litteratur I Cod. mbr. AM. 194, 8vo*, ed K Kaalund, (SUGNL 37), København 1908, II *Rímið.* ed N Beckman & K. Kaalund, (SUGNL 41), København 1914-16, III *Landalýsingar m. fl.*, ed K Kaalund, (SUGNL 45), København 1917-18
- ANF *Arkiv for nordisk filologi*, Christiania/Lund 1883-
- ASB *Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek I-XVIII*, Halle 1892-1929
- Á Árneshring (see map p 337)
- ÁB *Árna saga biskups*, ed Þorleifur Hauksson (RSÁ 2), Reykjavík 1972
- Árbók *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags*, Reykjavík 1881-
- B Borgarfjörður (see map p 339)
- BA *Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana*, Hafnæ 1941-
- Bsk *Biskupa sögur gefnar út af Hinu íslenska bókmenntafélagi I-II*, [ed Guðbrandur Vigfússon], Kaupmannahöfn 1858-1878
- Bysp *Byskupa sögur 1* hefte udgivet af Det kongelige nordiske oldskriftselskab, ed Jón Helgason, København 1938,
2 hefte (EAA 13), ed Jón Helgason, København 1978
- CCI *Corpus codicum Islandicorum medu ævi I-XX*, Copenhagen 1930-56
- CIC *Corpus iuris canonici I-II*, ed E. R. Richter, rev E Friedberg, Leipzig 1879
- DD *Diplomatarium Danicum*, Første række, bd I-VII, København 1963-90
- DI *Diplomatarium Islandicum, Íslenskt fornbréfasafn 834-1600 I-XVI*, København/Reykjavík 1857-1972
- DMA *Dictionary of the Middle Ages I-XIII*, New York 1982-89
- DN *Diplomatarium Norvegu um I-XXI*, Kna/Oslo 1847-1976
- E Eyjafjörður (see map p 332)
- EAA *Editiones Arnarnagæanæ Series A*, København 1958-
- EAB *Editiones Arnarnagæanæ Series B*, København 1960-
- EIM *Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile*, Copenhagen 1958 -
- En tale *En tale mot biskopene - En sproglig-historisk undersøkelse*, (Skrifter Utgitt av Det Norske Videnskabs-Akademi i Oslo II Hist-Filos Klasse 1930 No 9), ed A Holtmark, Oslo 1931
- Flat *Flatvejarbók - En samling af norske konge-sager I-III*, Christiania 1860-68
- FM *Fornmannasögur I-XII*, København 1825-37
- Grg I a-b *Grágás. Elzta logbók Íslendinga. Útgefin eptur skinnbókinni í bokasafni konungs*, 2 vols., ed Vilhjálmur Finsen, Kaupmannahöfn 1852 [repr with an introduction Reykjavík 1945]
- Grg II *Grágás efter det Arnarnagæanske Haandskrift Nr 334 fol.*, Stadurhólsbók, Kjøbenhavn 1879
- Grg III *Grágás Stykker, som findes i det Arnarnagæanske Haandskrift Nr 351 fol.* *Skálholtsbók og en Række andre Haandskrifter*, Kjøbenhavn 1883
- GSB *Guðmundar sögur biskups I - Lvi Guðmundar biskups. Guðmundarsaga A*, (EAB 6), ed Stetan Karlsson, København 1983
- H Hunahring (see map p 330)
- HakAM81afol *Hakonar saga Hakonarsonar in Det Arnarnagæanske håndskrift 81A Fol (Skálholtsbók yngsta)*, ed A Kjær & L Holm-Olsen, Kristiania/Oslo 1910-86
- Hauksbok *Hauksbók udgiven efter de Arnarnagæanske håndskrifter No 371, 544 og 675. 4° samt forskellige papirhåndskrifter*, [ed Eiríkur Jonsson & Finnur Jonsson], København 1892-96

- HE Finni Johannæi *Historia ecclesiastica Islandiæ* I-IV, Havniæ 1772-78
- HMS *Heilagramanna sögur. Fortællinger og legender om hellige mænd og kvinder* I-II, ed C R Unger, Christiania 1877
- HT *Historisk tidsskrift utgitt av den norske historiske forening*, Kristiania/Oslo 1871-
- IA *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578*, ed G Storm, Christiania 1888
- Icel Sagas *Icelandic sagas and other Historical Documents relating to the Settlements and Descents of the Northmen on the British Isles* I-II, ed Guðbrandur Vigfússon, London 1887
- ÍBS *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* I-II, ed Vesteinn Ólason, Reykjavík 1992-93
- ÍF *Íslensk fornrit*, Reykjavík 1933 -
- ÍP *Íslensk þjóðmenning* I, V-VII, Reykjavík 1987-90
- JarðabÁM *Jarðabók Árna Magnússonar og Páls Vídalíns* I-XI, Kaupmannahöfn 1913-43
- JJ *Jarðatal á Íslandi með braudtalvísingum, fólkstolu í hreppum og prestakollum, ágrípi af hunaðartoflum 1835-1845, og skýrslum um sölu þjóðjarða á landinu*, ed J Johnsen, Kaupmannahöfn 1847
- K Kjalarnes (see map p 328)
- KHL *Kulturlistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* I-XXII, Reykjavík 1956-78
- KLN *Kirke leksikon for Norden* I-IV, ed F Nielsen & J O Andersen, København 1900-29
- KVHAA Kungliga vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien, Stockholm
- Lat dok *Latinske dokumenter til norsk historie*, ed E. Vandvik, Oslo 1952
- LEI *Laws of Early Iceland Grágás I The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from other Manuscripts*, Trans. A. Dennis, P. Foote, & R. Perkins, (University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies III), Winnipeg 1980
- LS *Laurentius saga biskups*, (RHI III) ed Arni Björnsson, Reykjavík 1969
- Messk *Messuskýringar Liturgisk symbolik frå den norsk-íslandske kyrkja i millomalderen*, Fyrste heftet, ed O. Kolsrud, Oslo 1952
- MHN *Monumenta historica Norwegiae Latinske kildekrifter til Norges historie i middelalderen*, ed G Storm, Kristiania 1880
- Mork *Morkinskinna*, ed Finnur Jonsson, (SUGNL 53), København 1932
- MS *Medieval Scandinavia* I-II, Odense 1968-82
- NBL *Norsk biografisk leksikon* I-XXVIII, Oslo 1923-77
- NgL *Norges gamle love indtil 1387* I-V, Christiania 1846-95
- NID E. H. Lind *Norsk-Íslandska dopnamn og fingerade namn från medeltiden*, Uppsala 1905-15
- NIDa E. H. Lind *Norsk-Íslandska dopnamn og fingerade namn från medeltiden Supplementband*, Oslo 1931
- NoDipl *Norske diplomater til og med år 1300*, (Corpus codicum norvegicorum medii aevi, tolu serie vol II), ed F. Hødnebo, Oslo 1960
- Ob Isl *Íslenskar artúðaskráir eða Obituaría Íslandi*, ed Jon Þorkelsson, Kaupmannahöfn 1893-96
- OGNS Johan Frisvner *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog* I-III, Kristiania 1886-96
- OGNS IV *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog Rettelser og tilleggs ved Finn Hødnebo*, Oslo 1972
- ONPR *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog. Register. A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose Indices*, København 1989
- ÓSHS *Saga Olafs konungs hins helga Den store saga om Olav den hellige*, ed O. A. Johnsen & Jon Helgason, Oslo 1941
- ÓST *Olafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* I-II, ed Olafur Halldórsson (EAA 1-2) København 1958-61
- PP Sveinn Nielsson *Prestatal og prófusta* 2nd ed Reykjavík 1950
- R Rangarfjng (see map p 336)
- RGA *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde 2 vollig neu bearbeitete und stark erweiterte Auflage*, Berlin 1973 -
- RHI *Rit Handritastofnunar Íslands*, Reykjavík 1958-69
- RSÁ *Rit Stofnunar Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi* Reykjavík 1972-
- Sk Skagaljörður (see map p 331)
- SD Snæfellsnes and Dalir (see map p 34f and a detail map of Dalir p 310)

SI	<i>Studia Islandica</i> , Reykjavík 1937-
Skjald	<i>Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning A Tekst efter handskriftene I-II</i> , ed Finnur Jónson, København 1912-15
SÓT	<i>Saga Óláfs Trvggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason munk</i> , ed Finnur Jónsson, København 1932.
SS	<i>Scandinavian Studies</i> , Lawrence 1911-
StSÍ	<i>Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenskra bókmennta I-VI</i> , Kaupmannaholn/Reykjavík 1856-1939
Sturl	<i>Sturlunga saga. Árna saga biskups Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar hin sérstaka</i> , ed Ornóltur Thorsson, Reykjavík 1988
SturlK	<i>Sturlunga saga I-II Efter membranen Króksfjarðarbók. Udfyldt efter Revkjafjarðarbók</i> , ed K Kaalund, København 1906-11
SturlR	<i>Sturlunga saga I-II</i> , ed Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, Kristján Eldjarn, Reykjavík 1946
SUGNL	Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, København
Sv	<i>Sverris saga etter Cod. AM 327 4a</i> , ed G Indrebø, Kristiania 1920
THÍB	<i>Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafélags 1-24</i> , Reykjavík 1880-1904
TMM	<i>Tímarit Máls og menningar</i> , Reykjavík 1938-
V	Vestfirðir (see map p 329)
VS	Skaltafellsþing (western part) (see map p 335)
P	Þingeyjarþing (see map p 333)



I INTRODUCTION

I 1. Aims of thesis

Any student of late-medieval European history would have little difficulty in recognising the administration and judicial system of 14th century Icelandic society as fairly conventional. Apart from the economic base, which was sedentary-pastoral rather than agrarian, Icelandic society was structured much like any other poor, remote and isolated part of a European kingdom. It was governed by a distant king who appointed sheriffs and tax-collectors but who had otherwise little influence, or interest for that matter. Real political power lay in the hands of a landed gentry, a small group of church magnates and another small group of royal administrators. The church was by far the largest landowner but secular land was to a large extent in the hands of no more than a dozen families. This was a poor and apparently simple society; there were no great resources to fight over or hostile neighbours to be wary of. The documents this society produced about itself were of the dull sort; deeds of property transfer, church-charters, marriage contracts and wills. Together with the annals, the writing of which was waning in the 14th century, these documents are the principal sources for Icelandic society in the late middle ages. They differed from comparable documents from the same period in Europe only in that they were written in the vernacular.

This is a society which most students of high-medieval Iceland would be hard put to recognise from the sources which have made medieval Iceland famous. The saga literature describes a completely different society, a society with no administration, no centralised authority or executive power and a church dominated by secular interests. The rules governing conflict were very different and power-structures were at best unstable and usually completely chaotic. The sagas, both those describing Iceland's heroic past and those describing contemporary or near-contemporary events, were for the most part written in the 13th century. While the description of high-medieval society is remarkably consistent it is clear from these sagas that Icelandic society was undergoing fundamental changes in the 12th and 13th centuries.

It is with these changes this work is concerned. The objective is to identify and describe the mechanisms which made Icelandic society change. The simplest way to approach this is to study the formation of institutions which in turn is best examined in the context of the church. The church was the dominating power in late medieval

Iceland and its introduction must have affected the structure of the simple society which had been established in Iceland by the 11th century. The church is also the most obvious channel through which ideas were transmitted to Iceland and all the sources for Icelandic society were produced directly or indirectly in association with the church. It is therefore in every aspect natural to attempt to describe the development of Icelandic society from the 11th to the end of the 13th century by examining the development and growth of the church.

There is another dimension to this approach. It is the question of what defines a Christian society, a question most students of Christian missions and conversions must sooner or later grapple with. It is obvious that a mass-conversion like the one which took place in Iceland did not change the nature of society overnight. It is through examining the growth of ecclesiastical institutions and their interaction with society, and its power structures in particular, that we can get an idea of how Christian societies came into being and how the church affected the societies in which it became established.

I 2. Historical and historiographical background

In Scandinavian history writing of the high middle ages it is conventional to contrast church and state as diametrically opposed entities with different agendas, the friction between which dominated high level political conflict in the 12th and 13th centuries. This view presupposes that the state had an identity of its own and that the church also was a corporate entity, and that both were aware of the different interests and aims of the other. This view is of course perfectly applicable when the two were in conflict, as in Norway in the late 12th century when King Sverrir and Archbishop Eiríkr struggled about the limits of the church's sphere of power or in Iceland in the late 13th century when control over church property became a bone of contention between Bishop Árni Þorláksson and leaders of the secular aristocracy.

While different in detail these disputes all follow the same general pattern and all in the end were resolved in favour of the church. Furthermore all broke out in periods when royal power was consolidating in the respective countries, and although the issues were always settled in favour of the church it is also true to say that royal authority emerged stronger as a consequence. The conflict between *regnum et sacerdotium* therefore resulted in two fairly well defined institutions each with its own identity and agenda. This of course conforms well with the government of other European countries in the high and late middle ages, but it begs the question: How did this come about, what was government like before the dual hegemony of church and king became established?

The classical view is that royal authority always existed, or at least from the beginning of the Viking age onwards, and that it simply became more effective/burdensome/visible according to which school of thought one belongs, in the course of the 12th and 13th century. The church is normally seen as a most important agent in this development. It furnished the kings with a royal ideology and to begin with supported them against the autonomous chieftains or barons who formerly had held real power. In this context the church is almost always seen as a corporate identity, capable of having uniform and long term interests and following them through. Those who take a negative view of its influence would see it as a parasite imported from abroad, which although frail in the beginning steadily grows in influence until it has become equal to its host in size and power. Those who take a more positive view also see the church as a foreign import which gradually grows as society learns to appreciate its offerings; its humanising influence on government and legislation and the stability and order that eventually permeated society through its efforts. Most modern scholars take up their positions somewhere in-between these two positions and most try to avoid such subjective reasoning. It remains that the church is always seen as an independent and imported agent with a clear identity and agenda of its own from the outset.

In Icelandic historiography it is usually assumed that from the beginning the men of the church were quite conscious of their separate identity and that there was a fairly well defined division between the secular and ecclesiastical spheres. Representing the traditional stance is Magnús Stefánsson who thinks that in the 11th and 12th centuries ecclesiastical institutions like the *staðir*¹ were established by a self-conscious clergy, whereas in the 13th century the *staðir* came under the influence of laymen who began to treat them as their private property. This view is clearly coloured by the sources which view the late 11th and early 12th century as the golden age of Icelandic Christianity (see ch. III 1) but it also stresses the particular Icelandicness of the church in the 12th century. Bishops Ísleifr (1056-80) and Gizurr (1082-1118), St Jón (1106-21) and the priest Sæmundr *fróði* (d. 1133) are seen to have imported Christian institutions and quite consciously adjusted them to Icelandic circumstances. The differences between these institutions and what is seen as established practice elsewhere are seen as conscious choices of Icelanders committed to developing their own national church.²

This view is of course an integral part of nationalistic historiography and probably does not have many adherents any more. The opposition has however been slow in pointing out the weaknesses in the traditional view. It is most clearly represented by Sveinbjorn Rafnsson³ whose emphasis and arguments are analogous

¹ For this and other Icelandic terms in the text see the list of terms on p. 319.

² Magnús Stefánsson 1975: 69, 72, 97, 98, 111-18.

³ Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1975: 220, also 1982a: 94-101, 1979b.

with the diffusionist view of the origins of Icelandic medieval literature.¹ According to this view Icelandic medieval literature owes less to the circumstances of Icelandic society than to the supra-national Christian culture of medieval Europe. Similarly Sveinbjorn Rafnsson stresses that the church in Iceland was primarily a vehicle for influence from abroad; that there was nothing national about it and that real Icelandic church-men like St Þorlákr (Bishop of Skálholt 1178-93) and Guðmundr Arason (Bishop of Hólar 1203-37) strove to free the church from secular influence much in the same way as the reforming church was trying elsewhere in Europe in the 11th and 12th centuries.

Inbetween these extremes is the view of Helgi Þorláksson who still sees the church and the chieftains in conflict but denies the notion of a 'national church' and stresses the eagerness of the Icelandic chieftains to cooperate with the church for much of the 13th century.²

All these views assume that the church had a corporate identity at least from around 1100, that there was a body of men conscious of their special role as men of the church, and that this role was seen as separate from the interests of secular society.

The principal aim of this thesis is to challenge this view and show that it took a long time before the Nordic church gained an identity of its own, and that before it did, it was simply one aspect of life; an aspect which grew in importance because of its intrinsic need to organise itself and conditions around it. The emphasis on uniformity and constancy in the interpretation of the scriptures and celebration of the rites which is inherent to the Christian religion makes it necessary for it to establish organisation and hierarchies where there were none before. Those who established the first Christian institutions, the first bishops and the first abbots, did not foresee that the end product of their labours - one or two centuries later - would be an autonomous institution with its own jurisdiction, its own property and an institutionalised influence over the governance of the state. Their objectives were much more humble and in no way can they be seen as hostile to the existing societal structure. There were of course aspects of society, notably those that were associated with heathen practices, which the early church struggled against, but in general it is safe to say that the first generations of indigenous churchmen viewed their society as a unitary phenomenon and they viewed their task as one of adding to the cohesion and quality of this society. It is the fruit of their labours, the institutional structures which they created, which allowed secular rulers to begin to extend their influence. The development of institutional structures is a particular problem in relatively poor and under-populated countries like Scandinavia where surplus wealth was insufficient and not concentrated enough for complex secular

¹ Represented most clearly by Bjarni Einarsson 1961, Lonroth 1965, Andersson 1964, 1967, Clover 1982 and Sverrir Tomasson 1988a

² Helgi Þorláksson 1982a

structures to develop on their own. It is only after secular rulers began to use ecclesiastical structures as leverage to increase the sway and permanence of their powers, or, which was equally or more often the case, churchmen begin to be able to use ecclesiastical structures to increase their temporal influence, that there arises a friction between the two. From that point onwards there is still a long way until the church has developed a corporate identity and an ideology matching it.

Historical inquiry into high-medieval Iceland is traditionally concerned mainly with its constitution and its constitutional development. For non-Icelandic students of the commonwealth from Maurer to Miller the fascination has been with the constitution/societal structure as described in the sagas and the laws, while Icelandic historians have been more concerned to explain the development of this society and the changes which led to the union with Norway in 1262-64. Although it can hardly be classified as a state, high-medieval Icelandic society was clearly a constitutional entity and there is widespread agreement that this entity came into being within a century of the first Norsemen settling in Iceland. The date given by Ari *fróði* for the establishment of an assembly for the whole country, the Alþing at Þingvellir (Á), was 930¹ and according to him the country was divided into jurisdictions in a constitutional reform around 965.² With the conversion in 999/1000 and the establishment of the fifth court, a court of final instance, in 1004x30³ it is usually assumed that the Icelandic constitution had acquired the shape it would stay in until it began to disintegrate in the 12th century. The union with Norway in 1262-64 which had been preceded by a phase of extremely violent conflict, the *Sturlungaöld* or Age of the Sturlungs 1220-62, is then seen as the final collapse of the indigenous constitutional order which had been established more than three centuries earlier.

Within Icelandic historiography the emphasis has been squarely on identifying the factors which contributed to the disintegration and demise of this order. This debate has revolved around the concepts of independence and subjection and has at its roots the concerns of the generations of historians who lived through the struggle for independence from 1830 to 1944. Enough time has however lapsed from the proclamation of the republic in 1944 for a redefinition of interests to be in order.

To the present author it is far from clear what it was the Icelanders lost in 1262-64, losing independence in the sense that they acknowledged a Norwegian king is a rather subtle constitutional point which was far more meaningful in the 19th century than the 13th. On the other hand it is obvious what they obtained, a king; executive power, a new judicial system and a revised and updated law code. In other words they obtained the raw material of statehood and the means to keep peace.

¹ ÍF I, 8-9

² ÍF I, 11-12

³ ÍF I, 19. Grg Ia, 77-83

It is clear that Icelandic society was changing in the course of the 12th and 13th centuries, but instead of seeing these changes as a disintegration of an established order the view is taken here that the upheavals of the 12th and 13th centuries were rather symptoms of a society in the process of establishing more permanent structures of government.

Except for *Íslendingabók* which was written in 1122x33 all our sources for the history of high-medieval Icelandic society, both legal and narrative, were produced in the 13th century or later. Our ideas of the earlier centuries are therefore to a large extent conditioned by 13th century views of the past. Since society was going through drastic changes in the 13th century it is likely that these views of the past had to some extent been adapted to the changing conditions. It is also likely that they reflect 13th century justifications of what was then perceived then as established order as much as genuine traditions about the past. In particular there is reason to be wary of the sense of permanence of the judicial and legislative system suggested by the law and elaborations on the theme in some of the Sagas of Icelanders. There is no independent confirmation that these systems ever existed in the form which they are described in the laws. While for 19th century historians this meant that the arrangements described must be ancient, a more modern way of interpretation must be to accept that it is possible that they never existed at all or that they represent 13th century attempts to rationalise what systems there were in place and/or a 13th century bid to construct systems that someone thought should exist. The legal material has not been subject to study from the point of view of dating the provisions and putting them in context with social change, since the days of Konrad Maurer (1823-1902), Vilhjálmur Finsen (1823-92) and Andreas Heusler (1865-1940); and as long as a revision of their works based on more recent ideas on medieval society has not been attempted it is unsafe to assume that the legal sources can tell us anything about pre-12th century conditions.

To the mind of the present author it makes more sense to assume that political, legislative and judicial structures took a long time to develop and that power structures were at first chaotic and only slowly took on permanent features. The explanation which Helgi Skúli Kjartansson has come up with for the legal provisions for the *goðorð*, that they were not a definition of local power but only the right to representation at the Alþing,¹ makes excellent sense and it allows us to view the chieftaincies and their development in a much less constrained way than previously. Instead of a fixed number of chieftaincies, the numbers of which decreased through power accumulation, we can assume that chieftains came in all sorts, some owned *goðorð* and some did not, and that the nature of their power varied more according to local than national conditions. The importance of the *goðorð* and their accumulation in the hands of few

¹ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson 1989

families can then be seen as a late development and a consequence of the formation of overlordships. The importance which 13th century chieftains seem to have attached to owning or controlling *godord* may primarily have been a way for them to justify their claims to overlordship instead of being the root and reason for their authority

This approach has great implications for our understanding of the structure of Icelandic society and its development, some of which will be explored in this work.

This work is divided into three main chapters. Chapter II *Prehistory* deals with the 11th century. In it the sources for the early history and development of the church are examined and critically evaluated. It aims to establish what can with reasonable certainty be said about the church and Christianity in Iceland in the 11th century, i.e. the period before written records appear. Chapter III *The formation of Christian Institutions* represents the hub of the thesis. It starts with a discussion on the sources for the period in which the first ecclesiastical institutions - tithe and episcopal sees - appear. There follows an examination of the tithe, its roots and its effects on the development of Icelandic society and the church. The three subsequent chapters deal with the development of different aspects of the church. Churches, their building and endowment, forms of ownership and the origins of religious houses are discussed in chapter III 3. The social and political position of the bishops and the development of episcopal authority is examined in chapter III 4 and in chapter III 5 the social status of priests and their changing identity is traced.

In chapter IV a discussion is presented of some of the issues which arise from the more detailed inquiry in sections II and III. Here the emphasis is on examining the effects of the church on the development of power structures.

Between chapter V *Conclusions* and the Bibliography a list of terms has been inserted, where Icelandic terms and other concepts relating to medieval Iceland which are used in the text, are explained.

Most of the conventions used are self-explanatory but these can be mentioned:

- Names of medieval Icelanders are spelled in standardised Old Icelandic.
- Icelandic place names are spelled as they appear on the maps of the Danish Geodetic Institute (Geodætisk Institut). All place names are followed by an indicator of the region they are in, and can be found in the maps at the end of the dissertation.
- In the genealogical tables names in italics indicate a priest and names in bold lettering a chieftain.
- The majority of names given to individual families in the 12th and 13th centuries are modern constructs.¹ The names used here are based on the genealogical tables in SturlR II.

¹ Gunnar Karlsson 1994

I 3. Overview of the sources

This overview is not intended as a general introduction to the sources on medieval Icelandic history. There are some excellent recent introductions available¹ and we will here be concerned mainly with examining problems in the use and interpretation of those sources which are relevant to the subject of this work. As most of the available introductions restrict themselves almost entirely to the legal and narrative sources, and among the latter mostly to the sagas of Icelanders, greater emphasis will be put here on introducing the sources which tend to get left out, the sagas of bishops, the annals and the charters. Following a brief chronological outline of history writing in the 12th and 13th centuries, there is a more detailed account of the sources which are relevant to this work. This is followed by separate chapters on *Íslendingabók*, the annals, the Old Christian law section and the charters.

The beginnings of writing and book-keeping in the vernacular are usually traced back to around 1100. By this time a cathedral school had been established in Skálholt (Á) and instruction of priests was taking place at major *staðir* like Oddi (R) and Haukadalur (Á). Another cathedral school was established in the new bishopric at Hólar (Sk) in 1106. Literacy was therefore on the increase and with it arose both the need to have things in writing and a market for books, and, just as importantly, an audience which could be influenced more easily than before. In 1117-18 a project was initiated the aim of which was to codify the law. In that year the Treatment of Homicide section was committed to parchment and it is usually assumed that the rest of the laws were written down in the following years. A Christian Law section was composed by Bishops Þorlákr of Skálholt (1118-33) and Ketill of Hólar (1122-45) with the advice of Archbishop Özzur of Lund and in the same period (1122x33) the two bishops oversaw Ari *fróðvi's* (d. 1148) writing of *Íslendingabók*, a short chronicle of the history of Iceland and the Icelandic church. Ari is also associated with a list of high-born Icelandic priests from 1143 and may have written a *Life of Snorm goði*, a 10th century chieftain, both of which survive. Furthermore, he is thought to have compiled a first version of *Landnámabók* or *Book of Settlements* but after his day interest in Icelandic history seems to have waned. Instead there followed the writing of sagas of Norwegian kings and it was not until the beginning of the 13th century that works on Icelandic matters re-emerge. Among the first of these were the Latin *Lives* of the two indigenous saints, St Þorlákr and St Jón. Both were later translated into the vernacular. Ecclesiastical enthusiasm in the opening years of the 13th century is also witnessed by a chronicle of the bishops of Skálholt and

¹ Jonas Kristjánsson 1988 is the best treatment of medieval Icelandic literary evidence and deals with every type of source except the charters. Also Byock 1990: 14-50, Miller 1990: 43-76, Breisch 1994: 39-58 and the literary histories, Finnur Jonsson 1920-24, de Vries 1964-67, Turville-Petre 1967: ÍBS I, II

a saga of Bishop Páll (1195-1211). To this period belong also the earliest Contemporary Sagas, *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra* which both deal with political struggle in the second half of the 12th century. Most of the Contemporary Sagas as well as the Sagas of Icelanders were written towards the middle and in the second half of the 13th century. By 1300 saga writing was on the decrease while the making of administrative records was on the increase.¹ Annals in the form they are now known began to be compiled in the second half of the 13th century but their writing ceased before the middle of the 15th.

1 3.1 *Historical works*

Early Icelandic sources are almost entirely narrative. The only major exceptions are the annals, the laws and a handful of charters and letters. The narrative sources can be divided in two main groups. The smaller group is made up of the historical works *Íslendingabók*, or the Book of Icelanders, Ari fróði's short history of Iceland to 1120,² *Landnámabók*, or the Book of Settlements, a compilation of traditions about the settlement of Iceland in the 9th and 10th centuries,³ *Hungrvaka*, a chronicle about the bishops of Skálholt to Bishop Klængr's death in 1176,⁴ and *Kristni saga*, a late history of the conversion.⁵

Of these sources *Íslendingabók* will be considered in more detail below and about *Landnámabók* let it suffice to say that some kind of collection of traditions regarding the settlement was put together in the beginning of the 12th century, probably by Ari fróði, and this was reworked a century later by the priest Styrmir fróði (d. 1235). His version does not survive but it is the basis for the three main versions that do. Of these *Sturlubók*, by the historian Sturla Þórðarson, is the earliest, from around 1280; while *Melabók* and *Hauksbók*, by the scholar and lawman Haukr Erlendsson, are both from the beginning of the 14th century. *Landnámabók* is not relevant to this work except insofar as it is a source for late 13th century attitudes on nobility of lineage and traditions about a few early churches.

Hungrvaka is a chronicle of the bishops of Skálholt from the beginning to Bishop Klængr's death in 1176. It was written in the first two decades of the 13th century, probably by the same man that wrote *Páls saga*.⁶ *Hungrvaka's* aims are

¹ Ott Vésteinsson 1994

² IF I, 3-28

³ IF I, 31-397

⁴ Bysp I, 72-115

⁵ ASB XI, 1-57

⁶ ÍBS I, 345-48. Einar Arnórsson 1944-48. Jon Helgason 1960, Magnús Már Lárusson 1962c, Bekker-Nielsen 1972, 1985

straight forward. to preserve for posterity knowledge about Skálholt and its bishops. Its author was prompted to do this to honour his benefactors, the bishops of Skálholt and the see itself, and because he felt it would be useful for the young to know 'in what manner Christianity has grown here and how the sees came to be and what notable men the bishops were.'¹ His sources were as good as could be. If he did not live at Skálholt he at least had very close ties with the see and no doubt had access to what written records there were. But his main source was Gizurr Hallsson (b. ca. 1125 d. 1206) chieftain of the Haukdælir. Gizurr could not only remember all the bishops of Skálholt, save the two first ones, but he had also had close dealings with them and was the most likely man to preserve in memory stories of his great-grandfather and great-uncle, Bishops Ísleifr and Gizurr.

On these grounds *Hungrvaka* is generally regarded as a reliable source. Its bias arises from its aim to glorify the bishops of Skálholt. Yet it does, unlike *Íslendingabók* or *Jóns saga helga*, mention and comment on negative things in the past and even gives considerable room to criticism of Bishop Klængr's extravagance in financial matters.² Although no doubt a learned man, the author's style and perception of the past is in many ways more akin to the history writing of the lay scholars Snorri and Sturla than to that of the ecclesiastical scholars Ari and Gunnlaugr. In the case of *Hungrvaka* its comments on the differing luck and skill at peacekeeping of the different bishops form a coherent picture of the shifting fortunes of the Icelandic people's past, seen from the standpoint of a cleric writing in the first years of the 13th century. *Hungrvaka*, being on many points the only source available, has greatly influenced modern historians in their perception of the 12th century.

Hungrvaka only survives in 17th century copies. From a historical point of view there are no substantial problems with the transmission of these late manuscripts although the original they derive from seems to have been late and of poor quality.³

Kristni saga is the story of the conversion. It describes events that led to the conversion, the conversion itself at great length, and the subsequent history of the Icelandic church up to the death of St Jón in 1121. It is based mainly on *Íslendingabók*, but also on other sources like *Jóns saga helga*. To Ari's account of the conversion it adds some traditions available in the mid to late 13th century but it also has bits and pieces of information concerning late 11th and early 12th century history which are not found elsewhere.⁴

¹ [hvernig eða með hverjum hætti at her hefir magnazk kristnin ok byskupsstólar settir vent hér á Íslandi, ok vita síðan hvern merkismenn þeir hafa vent byskuparnir] - Bysp I, 73

² Bysp I, 107-108

³ Bysp I, 27-39, Bsk I, xxv-xxvii

⁴ Bjorn M. Olsen 1893 263-349, Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1937 120-24

Kristni saga must have been written after 1247 as it mentions a church which was still standing in the days of Bishop Bótólfr (1238-47) ¹ *Kristni saga* has not been studied much but most scholars repeat the opinion that it was written by Sturla Þórðarson (1214-84) the author of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, *Íslendinga saga* - the central piece of the Sturlunga compilation - and one of the main versions of *Landnámabók*. The idea is that he wrote *Kristni saga* to link with his *Landnámabók* to bridge the gap between it and the first sagas of the Sturlunga compilation in order to have a continuous history of Iceland.² Whatever the value of this, it seems certain that *Kristni saga*, in the form it comes to us, was written sometime in the latter half of the 13th century.

Kristni saga is preserved in one of the great compilations, *Hauksbók* written around or shortly after 1300 ³

1 3.2. Problems in the interpretation of *Íslendingabók*

Under the auspices of the two bishops and Sæmundr fróði, another priest, Ari fróði Þorgilsson wrote between 1122 and 1133 a short book called *Íslendingabók* or *Libellus Islandorum*. Ari says in his prologue that there was an earlier version which the bishops and Sæmundr read and censored, making him omit genealogies and a history of the Norwegian kings among other things ⁴. The second version is a history of the Icelanders where the main emphasis is on establishing the chronology and accounting for the growth of Christianity and the church. Ari quotes his authorities on almost every statement, accounting for the age and relative wisdom of each. His accounts of dates and events are generally thought to be reliable back to the middle of the 10th century, but earlier events and their dates seem to be more like learned guesswork. Ari's accounts form the basis of early Icelandic history; they have as yet not been contradicted. In later medieval works Ari is quoted extensively and *Íslendingabók* is the basic source for almost all later historical writing of the early period.

Íslendingabók survives only in two mid 17th century transcripts of the same manuscript by the same man. The transcripts are generally held to be very accurate, the later version even tries to copy the style of the handwriting in the manuscript. That manuscript is dated to the second half of the 12th century. It compares well with a

¹ ASB XI, 11

² This idea was first advanced by Finnur Jonsson in *Hauksbók*, lxxv-lxxiv. See also Jon Johannesson 1941: 70-71, *ÍBS* I, 306-308.

³ *BSk* I, vi-vii. *Hauksbók*, 126-49.

⁴ This non-existing earlier version has claimed more scholarly attention than most existing works from medieval Iceland: Maurer 1870b, 1891, Björn M. Olsen 1885, 1889, 1893, Hagnell 1938: 87-113, Einar Arnorsson 1942: 27-30, Björn Sigfusson 1944, 1962b, Halldor Hermannsson 1948, Hermann Palsson 1961, Ellehøj 1965, Turville-Petre 1953: 92-102, Jakob Benediktsson in *IF* I, viii-xvii, Sverrir Tomasson 1975, Mundal 1984, 1994, Helgi Skuli Kjalartansson 1986a, Gunnar Harðarson 1987, *ÍBS* I: 293.

chunk quoted from *Íslendingabók* in a Treatise on computation from the end of the 12th century.¹

It is interesting that Ari's trustworthiness, a reason for relief in a period otherwise lacking in credible sources, is at the same time also the reason for the lack of speculation concerning the early history of Icelandic medieval society (i.e. before 1100) and the uncritical confidence with which historians refer to the nature of Icelandic society before the 12th century. Because Ari seems to be accurate on everything he has to say at least from the late 10th century onwards and because of his down-to-earth and unspeculative style, historians have been lured into a feeling of false security, thinking that because we have a number of indisputable facts from Ari we can know the society in which these events took place. Ari's influence lies not only in the trustworthy nature of his work, but also in that he has influenced everybody else, both modern and 13th century scholars. Because Ari set the tune in the beginning, and is believable, the works of his successors, while not always as believable, are always in accordance with Ari and thus may seem trustworthy on the points they add. This concurrence makes it more difficult to evaluate Ari's information. It also makes the general view of the past, which is mostly based on Ari, seem both indispensable and much more convincing than it maybe should.

It is now more than half a century since the Sagas of Icelanders ceased to be considered as reliable sources for the 10th and 11th centuries. As a result most historical studies of medieval Iceland which have appeared since have concentrated on later periods for which there are relatively plentiful sources (i.e. from ca. 1150 onwards) or simply ignored the factor of time. While questions concerning the 10th and 11th centuries have not been uppermost in people's minds, there is however a tendency to trust in *Íslendingabók* for the early chronology and the origins of societal institutions like the Alþing, the quarter division and the fifth court. Thus the combination of incomplete knowledge and the reliability of the few scraps of information that are available, has conspired on the one hand to limit research into the prehistoric period and on the other to build an uncritical view of the development of society in that period. In particular, Ari has been allowed to dictate what was important in the development of Icelandic society down to his own time. Because the facts he presents us with are believable, there has been a strong tendency to believe that these were also the important facts. Which is not necessarily the same thing.

In *Íslendingabók* Ari presents us with a selection of facts based on his (and the bishops' and Sæmundr fróðvi's) judgement of what were the relevant issues in the history of the Icelanders. His attitudes are of course interesting in themselves and as indications of conditions in the early 12th century; *Íslendingabók* is a testimony to the

¹ Bjorn Sigfusson 1944 20-33, IF I, xlii-xliii

importance supra-regional institutions like the Alþing, the lawspeaker, the quarter courts and the fifth court had acquired by 1100. While we have few options but to believe Ari in his datings of the establishment of these institutions we do not have to follow him in thinking that they were from the outset as significant as they became later. Institutions rarely emerge full-grown but once they have become established they tend to try to trace their origins as far back as possible. The Alþing may well have been established towards the middle of the 10th century and a succession of men calling themselves lawspeakers may equally well have been associated with the proceedings from the outset. That does not mean that the assembly had immediately acquired the importance it came to have later as a venue for national politics.

I 3.3 Sagas

Medieval Icelandic saga literature is traditionally divided into several groups of which only four need concern us, the sagas of kings, sagas of Icelanders, contemporary sagas and sagas of bishops. The sagas of kings are important sources for the 12th and 13th century history of Norway in particular and therefore form the background to Icelandic history of the period. *Sverris saga*, the biography of King Sverrir Sigurðarson (1185-1202),¹ *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, the biography of King Hákon Hákonarson (1217-63)² and the fragment of *Magnúsar saga lagabætis*, the biography of King Magnús Hákonarson (1263-80)³ are particularly important for Icelandic attitudes to Norwegian politics and increasing royal influence in Iceland in the 13th century. In saga compilations dealing with the missionary kings Ólafr Tryggvason (995-1000)⁴ and Ólafr Haraldsson (1015-30)⁵ there is considerable material with traditions on the 10th century missions to Iceland and the conversion. A sub-genre of the sagas of kings are the *þættir* (pl., *þáttir* in sg.), short pieces which usually deal only with one episode in a protagonist's life, usually of an Icelander abroad, and among these are *Þáttur af Þorvaldi*, a story of the mission of Þorvaldr víðfǫrli to Iceland in the 980s⁶ and *Ísleifs þáttur*, a story of how Ísleifr Gizurarson was honoured abroad and how he wooed Dalla before he became bishop of Skálholt in 1056.⁷

The Sagas of Icelanders (also called Family sagas) deal with events in the 9th to 11th centuries and represent a heroic past constructed in the 13th century and later. The

¹ Sv

² Codex Frisianus, 387-583, Eirspennill, 471-664, Flat III, 3-233, HakAM81afol, Icel Sagas II, 1-360

³ Icel Sagas II, 361-74

⁴ SOT, 122-30, OST I, 255-301, 308-11, 358-400, II, 18-20, 64-66, 93-102, 149-66, 177-200, 210, IF XXVI, 319-20, 328-33, 347

⁵ ÓSHS, I 5, 110-11, 325, 695, 766-67, ÍF XXVII, 74, 77, 214

⁶ ASB XI 59-81

⁷ Bysp I, 21-23

historicity of these texts has been a central issue in Icelandic medieval studies for over a century; they have gone from being considered as accurate as police reports¹ to being branded as fine literature with little or no historical value.² At present it is in vogue to stress their value as sources for social history.³ This approach has proved fruitful although it is necessarily insensitive to societal development and is incapable of differentiating between reality and perceptions of reality. In the present work the Sagas of Icelanders play only a limited role as sources for 13th century ideas on 11th century Christianity.

The Contemporary Sagas are like the Sagas of Icelanders mainly written in the 13th century but unlike them they deal with a more recent past. These sagas often describe events which took place in the lifetime of the authors and some of them are eye-witness accounts. Except for *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* and *Svínfellinga saga* which deal with particular disputes, most of the Contemporary Sagas are biographies while the longest, *Íslendinga saga*, can only be described as a chronicle. Except for one late saga (*Arons saga*) all the contemporary sagas that survive were shortly after 1300 merged in one large compilation, the *Sturlunga saga*.⁴ One of the sagas in the compilation, *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, also survives in a separate version, and by comparing it to the compiler's version it can be shown that the latter cut and changed his raw materials to suit his own ideas of structure and his own perception of the past.⁵ The Contemporary Sagas are therefore by no means unproblematic sources. Each saga was originally written with a bias in favour of the main protagonist and on top of that is added the viewpoint of the compiler. In trying to understand the whys and wherefores of political manoeuvres these sagas are therefore not at all as straightforward as they may seem at first glance. As sources of detail about everyday life, people's names, addresses and relationships the Contemporary Sagas are however excellent sources and provided that they are interpreted with care they are a goldmine for 13th century attitudes as well as events.

Of the main sagas in the Sturlunga compilation *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* is the first.⁶ It is an account of a dispute between two important chieftains in western Iceland in the years 1117-21. The description of this clash - the historical significance of which is examined in ch. III 1 - is in many ways closer to the style and form of Sagas of Icelanders than the other Contemporary Sagas and this saga can be considered to stand

¹ For instance Bogi Th Melsteð 1903-30

² The so-called Icelandic school, esp the works of Sigurður Nordal (1957 11-35 in particular) and Einar Ol Sveinsson. See Árni Sigurjónsson 1984, Gunnar Karlsson 1980b, 1984

³ E.g. Sørensen 1977, 1993, Byock 1982, 1990, Miller 1990

⁴ The compilation survives in two principal manuscripts from the late 14th century. *Þorgils saga skarða* and *Sturlu þattr* were only added to the compilation in the 17th century

⁵ Tranter 1987, Úllar Bragason 1988

⁶ Jón Jóhannesson in SturlR II, xxii-xxv, Brown ed 1952 ix-ixii, Jakob Benediktsson 1976c, ÍBS I, 321-22

between the two genres. In it there are references to King Sverrir (d. 1202) and Bishop Magnús Gizurarson (d. 1237) which suggests a time of writing around 1240. It is therefore written more than a century later than the events described and is best regarded as a 13th century exposition of an event which was seen to represent the beginning of the conflict which then engulfed the country. *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða* is remarkable among the Contemporary Sagas in that clerics play a big and positive role in solving the conflict peacefully and it is likely that this reflects mid-13th century ecclesiastical emphasis on conciliation (see ch. III 5.5.2).

Sturlu saga and *Guðmundar saga dýra* are both biographies of late 12th century chieftains. They are both considered to be written in the early 13th century¹ probably by men who remembered their subjects and some of the events described. *Sturlu saga* is the biography of the chieftain Sturla Þórðarson in Hvammur (SD) (d. 1183). It describes his career beginning around 1150 with his attempts to establish regional dominance, through to his death taking on ever bigger fish. Sturla was the father of the Sturlungar brothers, Þórðr, Sighvatr and Snorri who dominated politics in Iceland in the early 13th century and it is likely that the writing of the saga is in some way connected with some of Sturla's many influential descendants. The saga is however not a whitewash of him; it takes his side completely in his disputes with his neighbouring chieftain Einarr Þorgilsson in Staðarhóll (SD) but when Sturla began to take on more distant and greater chieftains like Þorleifr *beiskaldi* in Hítardalur (B) and Páll Sólvason in Reykholt (B) the perspective changes and Sturla is depicted as a boor.²

Guðmundar saga dýra is more obviously an apology for the chieftain Guðmundr *dýri* (d. 1212) Guðmundr was struggling for supremacy in Eyjafjörður in the 1180s and 1190s and finally achieved his goal by the burning of his principal enemy Qnundr Þorkelsson in Langahlíð (E) in 1197. The burning seems however to have overstepped the limits of political propriety and Guðmundr withdrew to a monastery a few years later. The saga describes him as a reluctant chieftain who was stirred to trouble only after considerable provocation, his rise to power is made out to be a series of accidents and none of it of his doing.³

Coterminous with *Guðmundar saga dýra* is *Prests saga Guðmundar Arasonar*. It is the biography of Guðmundr Arason from his birth in 1161 to 1203 when he became bishop of Hólar. This saga is also preserved in several versions of a compilation called *Guðmundar saga biskups*.⁴ Unlike the other sagas in the Sturlunga compilation the *Prests saga* is not about conflict or politics; it is simply a year to year account of the life

¹ ÍBS I, 315

² Foote 1984a, 9-30, Also Jon Johannesson in SturlR II, xxvi-xxvii, Jakob Benediktsson 1972d, Jakobsen 1986, ÍBS I, 316-18

³ Magnus Jonsson 1940, Jon Johannesson in SturlR II, xxx-xxxii, Simpson 1957-61, 1960, Bjorn Sigfusson 1960c, ÍBS I, 316-18

⁴ Jón Johannesson in SturlR II, xxvii-xx, Bjorn Sigfusson 1960b, Stefan Karlsson 1984, 1985, Stelán Karlsson in GSB I, xxviii, cxliv-cliii

of its hero interspersed with annalistic information. The *Prestssaga* was written in the middle of the 13th century and is believed to be the unfinished first part of a Life of Guðmundr whose sanctity was widely acknowledged but never firmly established.¹ Although it is not particularly hagiographic in style it is clearly written to glorify Guðmundr by someone who was close to him and was probably present at some of the events in the last few years dealt with in the saga.²

A great friend of Guðmundr Arason, and a near holy man, was the chieftain Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson from Eyn in Arnarfjorður (V) (d. 1211). *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* is preserved both in a separate version and in an abridged form in the Sturlunga compilation. The saga was written in the middle of the 13th century. It describes conflicts in Vestfirðir in the period c. 1190 to 1211 and in particular the rise of the chieftain Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, his struggle with the neighbouring chieftain Þorvaldr *Vatnsfirðingr* from Vatnsfjorður (V) which led to Hrafn's execution in 1211. Hrafn was a physician of note and the separate version in particular stresses his Christian qualities, his good deeds and peaceful demeanour. The separate version is more one sided while the compiler of Sturlunga has managed to emphasise the political nature of Hrafn's actions.³

The central text of the Sturlunga compilation and the far longest of all its constituent sagas is *Íslendinga saga* written by Sturla Þórðarson in 1264x84. It is neither a biography nor an account of a particular dispute like the other sagas in the compilation but a chronicle of political conflict from the 1180s to 1264. Sturla was himself an active chieftain in the middle of the 13th century and was present at many of the events described. The saga is more concerned with events in the North and West where Sturla and his relatives were most active. It is nevertheless clear that Sturla was attempting to write a balanced history and his personal viewpoints are rarely transparent. Sturla was a skilful and meticulous historian and manages to weave a comprehensive if intricate picture of political developments using incredible amounts of personal and geographical detail. *Íslendinga saga* is a fascinating source but Sturla's very skill is also an obstacle in the sense that it is often difficult to detect his bias⁴

¹ On Guðmundr's sainthood see Ólafur Lárússon 1944 244-79, Magnus Mar Lárússon 1960g, Foote 1961

² Bsk I, lviii-ix Bjorn M. Olsen 1902 224-26

³ Jon Jóhannesson in SturlR II, xvii-xxviii, Bjorn Siglússon 1962a, Heller 1977, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir ed 1987 vi-cxvi Úllar Bragason 1988, ÍBS I, 314, 355-56

⁴ Bjorn M. Olsen 1902 385-437, Petur Sigurðsson 1933-35, Jón Jóhannesson in SturlR II, xxxiv-xli, Gunnar Benediktsson 1961, Jakob Benediktsson 1972c 357-58, Guðrún Asa Grímsdóttir 1988, ÍBS I, 324-26 On Sturla's attitudes see Cirkamini 1983, 1988a, 1988b, Gunnar Karlsson 1988, Úlfar Bragason 1989 On Sturla himself see Sveinn Skúlason 1856, Ker 1906, Janus Jonsson 1914, Magerøy 1966, Heller 1978, Sørensen 1988, Helgi Þorláksson 1988b

Svínfellinga saga is a short saga which deals with the revolt of a powerful local leader against a chieftain around 1250. It is written in the late 13th century and is the only saga which deals with events in the Eastern quarter.¹

Þórðar saga kakala and *Þorgils saga skarða* are both biographies and apologies for their respective heroes. *Þórðar saga* describes Þórðr *kakali*'s bid to govern Iceland in the 1240s² and *Þorgils saga* the same sort of attempt by his cousin in the 1250s.³ They are both written in the late 13th century by men who were close to the events described. *Þorgils saga* is not original to the compilation and a fragment of a separate version which survives shows that the later compiler has cut the saga drastically. Not as skilfully written as *Íslendinga saga* these sagas are nevertheless elaborate and detailed and give valuable insights into the political factions in the middle of the 13th century

The Sagas of Bishops is a mixed group of sagas which do not really make up a separate genre.⁴ On the one hand there are two saint's Lives, *Þorláks saga* and *Jóns saga*, both originally written in Latin around 1200 and later translated into the vernacular. Three principal versions of each saga survive. On the other hand there are three biographies of bishops which in style and method are much closer to the contemporary sagas. These are *Páls saga*, about Bishop Páll Jónsson of Skálholt (1195-1211), *Árna saga*, about Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (1269-98) written shortly after 1300 and *Laurentius saga*, about Bishop Laurentius Kálfsson of Hólar (1324-31) almost certainly written by the church dignitary Einarr Hafliðason (d. 1393).⁵

Páls saga is a skilfully composed biography of Bishop Páll Jónsson of Skálholt, written, not so much in defence, as in praise of its hero shortly after his death, probably by the same author as wrote *Hungrvaka*. In the latter part of his episcopacy Bishop Páll had to deal with an uncompromising reformer on the other see of Hólar and the author makes no secret of his disgust of Guðmundr Arason's behaviour. *Páls saga* may be a reaction to Guðmundr's politics in the sense that its author thought there was good reason to show how a no-nonsense bishop should be. As it is written by a contemporary, who probably lived at Skálholt or had at least close connections with the see, *Páls saga* is a unique source for conditions at the episcopal sees around 1200.⁶

Árna saga and *Laurentius saga* differ from all other sagas in that their authors made frequent use of documents. This is particularly true of *Árna saga* which is a spirited defence of the uncompromising prelate who for three decades fought against

¹ Jon Jóhannesson in *SturlR II*, xliii-xlvi, Heller 1964, Úlfar Bragason 1990 73-88, ÍBS I, 326-30

² Jon Jóhannesson in *SturlR II*, xli-xliii, Ulfar Bragason 1994

³ Jon Jóhannesson in *SturlR II*, xlvi-xlviii Jakob Benediktsson 1976c, Úlfar Bragason 1981

⁴ ÍBS I, 345, Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1992

⁵ Magnus Mar Larusson 1956g, Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1958, Jørgensen 1977, Foote 1978

⁶ Magnus Mar Larusson 1968c, ÍBS I, 348-50, Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1993 9-44

lay control over church property and won a qualified victory with the Treaty of Ogvaldsnes in 1297. The saga does not survive complete, stopping short in 1290.¹ Both *Laurentius saga* and *Árna saga* are written from a clearly ecclesiastical point of view and in *Laurentius saga* in particular there is almost no room for the secular world; Laurentius Kálfsson spent his whole life embroiled in ecclesiastical intrigues into which his saga gives valuable insights.²

Þorláks saga helga is the Life of St Þorlákr Þórhallsson (b. 1133) bishop of Skálholt (1178-93). It survives in three versions; the relationship between them is discussed in some detail in ch. III 3.4 in the context of establishing the origins of *Oddaverja þáttr* which is only preserved in the B and C versions. Þorlákr's translation was in 1198 and his feast day was legalised at the Alþing in 1199. Many of his miracles were recorded in this period and survive in an early manuscript. A Latin life was composed about this time and the A (vernacular) version is believed to have been composed before the death of Bishop Páll in 1211.³

Jóns saga helga is the Life of St Jón Ögmundarson (b. 1052) the first bishop of Hólar (1106-21). Its contents and views of the past are discussed in detail in ch. III 1. It survives in three versions (A, B and C). There has been considerable disagreement among philologists as to the relationship between the versions and the date of their writing. The general opinion now seems to be that A is from the 13th century but that B and C were written in the 14th century and that all are based on an original, and now lost, Latin Life of St Jón by Gunnlaugr Leifsson monk at Þingeyrar (H). B states clearly that it is a translation of Gunnlaugr's Life, but opinions have varied as to the relationship of the other two versions with it. A is substantially different from B, which is more elaborate and latinised. C seems to be a merger of A and B, although it is much closer to A. All the versions have been edited and augmented by the translators and/or editors.⁴

The prologue of B quotes Gunnlaugr's original in that Bishop Guðmundr urged him to write the Life of St Jón.⁵ The mid-1190s had seen a sudden interest in saint making, principally of Þorlákr Þórhallsson (b. 1133 d. 1193) the newly deceased bishop of Skálholt. St Þorlákr's mass day was legalised at the Alþing in 1199.⁶ It seems that the prospect of a saint from the southern diocese of Skálholt prompted the men of the northern diocese of Hólar to come up with one of their own. The first recorded

¹ Magnus Mór Lárússon 1956c, ÁB, Ixii-cvii Guðrún Ása Grimsdóttir 1994

² Magnus Mór Lárússon 1965f, LS, ix-lxvi, Jørgensen 1977. On the author see also Magnús Mór Lárússon 1981, Magnus Hauksson 1985

³ Jakob Benediktsson 1969a, Jon Helgason 1976, Asdís Egilsdóttir ed 1989, ÍBS I, 473-74

⁴ For a survey of differing opinions see Magnús Mór Lárússon 1962h 617-618, Sveinr Tómasson 1988a 339-43

⁵ Bsk I, 215-216, see also 235, 240, 257 and 207 (C). This is also mentioned in the *Guðmundar saga biskups* written by brother Arngrímur in the mid 14th century - Bsk II, 31

⁶ IA, 22, 62, 121, 181, 324

miracles of St Jón are from 1198¹ and his mass day was legalised at the Alþing in 1200.² It is therefore assumed that St Jón's Life must have been written about this time, probably along with his miracles which Bishop Brandr (d. 1201) had had recorded and read out shortly before his death in 1201.³ While still a priest his successor Guðmundr Arason had been involved in furthering the cause of Þorlákr's saintliness and had sent a collection of his miracles to Gunnlaugr to write down⁴ Even before Guðmundr became bishop of Hólar (selected in 1201, consecrated in 1203), he was among the most influential clergymen in Iceland and he could well have asked Gunnlaugr to write the Life before he was formally a bishop. The fact that it was written in Latin also suggests that this was a part of a concentrated effort to have St Jón canonised, tied in with the legalisation of his mass day and the recording of his miracles. It is therefore likely that Gunnlaugr wrote his Life of St Jón around 1201, rather than towards the end of his life in 1218 or 1219⁵

Together with *Þorláks saga helga*, *Jóns saga helga* is much closer to Latin hagiographic literature than Icelandic saga literature in style and content. This is especially true of the B version while the style of A is closer to the saga tradition. Even if it may seem that B is a more faithful translation it is also clear that it has been edited and added to⁶ For instance it has been pointed out that B adds the prayer *Ave Maria* to the daily prayers of St Jón,⁷ but this prayer did not become common in the Nordic countries until the late 13th century.⁸

1.3.4. *Annals, genealogies and the sources of the sagas*

10 principal annals survive, some in original 14th century manuscripts. They are a principal source for the history of the 14th century but for the earlier periods their importance lies mainly in that their writers had access to different and more copious material than we have today and they therefore often give a different picture of what were thought to be important people or events.

¹ Bsk I, 178, 251 - The C version (the most recent of the three) adds a miracle occurring shortly after St Jón's death and miracles-stories of Hildi the nun and Guðrun *kirkjukerting* set in the period before 1159 - Bsk I, 203-207

² IA, 22, 62, 181

³ Bsk I, 192

⁴ Bsk I, 369

⁵ IA, 125, 184, 326 [for 1219], 255 [for 1218], cf. 479 [for 1216]

⁶ Magnus Mar Larusson 1962h: 617 Foote 1978: 41

⁷ Bsk I, 237

⁸ Wadding 1958: 1-7

The annals have not been studied to any great extent,¹ but several points about them are clear. Firstly it seems that annals, in the form we know them, only began to be written in the last quarter of the 13th century. *Annales Resensiani* end first, in 1295², which puts the commencement of annal writing before that date. The nature of the year to year entries changes greatly in all the annals in the 1270s and 1280s. Prior to that time the entries are few and short and explanations are almost never given. It is only after 1270-80 that the annals begin to show signs of entries being made each year or at least fairly soon afterwards. From that time onwards each annal takes on an individual character, with longer and more detailed descriptions of peoples and events.

The questions that concern us here are where did the body of information utilised by the first annal writers for their 10th to 13th century entries come from? How can it be trusted? And what can it tell us about the nature of the historical information available to writers of the narrative sources?

The six annals which cover the 10th to 13th centuries are all related and are to varying degrees copies of the same originals³ Some of the annals are more recent than the main narrative sources for the 12th and 13th centuries and it is therefore possible that they derive some of their entries from the sagas. To what extent this is true has yet to be shown but it is also possible that the entries which agree with the narrative sources derive from some other source also used in the sagas. There are in the annals several entries which can not be shown to have come from any saga but are of similar nature to those that can.

Three of the annals record an eclipse of the sun, which occurred on 30th March 1131⁴ One of the entries gives not only the date but also the hour of the eclipse. This solar eclipse could be seen in North America and West Iceland but not elsewhere in Europe,⁵ and it is not recorded in other European annals. The Icelandic annals are clearly independent in their recording of astronomical phenomena, they consistently record eclipses which could be seen in Iceland but often omit eclipses which could only be seen in other parts of Europe.⁶ The exact time of a solar eclipse is not the type of information that is preserved in memory. It follows from this that memorable events like solar eclipses were being written down in Iceland at least from the 1130s onwards.

¹ For what little there is see IA, I-LXXXIV, Beckman 1912a and 1912b, Finnur Jónsson 1920-24 II, 780-82, III, 68-76, Barðr Guðmundsson 1936b, Hermann Palsson 1965a, 1970: 32-43, Ólafía Einarsdóttir 1964, Þorleitur Hauksson in ÁB, Ixii-lxxx, Stelán Karlsson 1969, 1988, Jakob Benediktsson 1976f, Jon Helgason 1977, Jónas Kristjánsson 1980. All Icelandic medieval annals are published in IA

² IA 30

³ *Annales Resensiani*, *Høyers annáll*, *Annales regii*, *Skálholtsannáll* (discontinued between 1012 and 1181), *Logmannsannáll* and *Gottskálksannáll*. *Annales vetustissimi* is discontinued between 999 and 1270 and *Flateyjarannáll* has hardly any independent value for this period and *Oddaverjaannáll* none at all

⁴ IA, 20, 59, 320, see also 252

⁵ Oppolzer 1962 chart 112 Schroeter 1923 Ixiv, karte 64a

⁶ Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson 1990 39-40

In what form is really anyone's guess, but this shows that various kinds of information must have been available to both saga writers and annal writers.

An example of information being written down in the first half of the 12th century which has come down to us is a list of Icelandic priests from 1143. It gives the names of ten priests in each quarter, listed, it seems, in geographical order, under the heading 'These are the names of some high-born Icelandic priests'¹. The reason why this list was compiled is obscure, but this is precisely the kind of document which saga writers seem to have been using for some of their information. For instance the author of *Kristni saga* writing of the state of the country in Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson's lifetime, tells us that most notable men at that time were priests even if they were chieftains as well and gives the names of ten of them. He also gives the names of the 13 most important chieftains at the time of Gizurr's death in 1118.² This information is highly significant, and the reason why it is credible even if it comes to us through a text written 150 years or more after these men died, is that we can assume that the author of *Kristni saga* was using lists comparable to the list of priests of 1143.

This argument of course only holds for the types of information which have parallels in extant documents. But it is also possible to deduce from the sagas themselves, the annals and other documents a general idea about what kinds of information were being recorded. Most of this information will fall under what the author of the *First Grammatical Treatise* called *ættvísi*³ and the author of *Hungrvaka mannfraedi*⁴ which can both be translated as genealogy, although *mannfraedi* may have had a somewhat wider meaning⁵.

The *First Grammatical Treatise* is thought to have been written between 1125 and 1175⁶ (probably in the later part of that period). Its author lists this *ættvísi* among writings he says have been made in the vernacular by his time. Very few works are preserved which can be said to fit into this category,⁷ but the sagas themselves abound with both direct and indirect evidence that the authors must have had access to written genealogical information. Apart from the Saints' lives the principal characteristic of saga literature is the importance attached to relations between people. Individuals are defined through their relations to other individuals and acts or events are explained through the relationships between the peoples concerned. Saga authors often include whole sections of dry genealogical information, which do not necessarily have a direct bearing on the narrative although they can enhance the keen reader's understanding of

¹ [Pessi eru notn naevra presta cynborinna íslenzra] - DI I 185-86. On this list see ch. III 5.2

² Bsk I, 29-31

³ Hreinn Benediktsson ed. 1972: 22

⁴ Bsk I, 59

⁵ Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1994

⁶ Olafur Halldórsson 1990a: 66

⁷ An example is *Byskupa ættur*, a small collection of genealogies from the 14th century, printed in Bysp I, 7-12

it. This is true not only of the sagas of Icelanders but also of the historical sagas, especially of the Sturlunga compilation.¹

As there is evidence that genealogical information was being written in the 12th century, it is safe to assume on the one hand that the authors of sagas dealing with this period had access to this material, and on the other that this information is reliable. This is indicated by the internal consistency of this kind of information in the various sagas. As people's relationships are so important to the structure of the sagas it may even be proposed that genealogical information was the medium through which events were remembered, to be, at some later time, written down in a narrative form. The idea that history is told through named individuals is not something that appeals to modern people. It is however the way in which the writers of our sources viewed their subject matter, they studied genealogy for its own sake and it was the framework within which they told stories. This must be appreciated and studied if we are to be able to pass judgements on the credibility of these sources, and, indeed, to understand them.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine in what form *ættvísni* and *mannfræði* were written in the 12th century, or how exactly this information was used by saga writers. It is enough for the present purposes to point out that even if our sources (i.e. the Contemporary Sagas, the bishops' biographies and the annals) were written fifty or hundred years after the events took place, there is evidence that the authors had access to material written much closer in time to the events and individuals described. This does not allow us to assume that everything presented in these sources is correct or that the authors did not shape their material to suit their own ends. Facts and figures were misinterpreted by 13th century historians like historians of all other periods. The narrative technique used by saga writers must always have called for a certain amount of modification and sometimes fabrication of the material to fit the saga structure.

13.5. *Grágás and the Christian Law sections*²

Grágás is preserved in two principal manuscripts, AM 334 fol.³, called *Staðarhólsbók*, and GkS 1157 fol.⁴, called *Konungsbók* or *Codex regius*. Although these manuscripts accord with each other to a large extent, in that clauses are often verbally identical, there are considerable differences which suggest that they are not

¹ See Úlfar Bragason 1993

² Maurer 1864, Vilhjálmur Finsen in Grg II, i-xxv, Grg III, iii-lvi, Páll Briem 1885, Olafur Lárússon 1958b, 1960a, Magnus Mar Lárússon 1964b, Jacoby 1986 210-23, Gunnar Karlsson 1992

³ Printed in Grg 1a-b.

⁴ Printed in Grg II

closely related.¹ The main differences are that the order of clauses, chapters and sections is far from the same; *Konungsbók* (hereafter **K**) has four sections and a few chapters which *Staðarhólsbók* (hereafter **S**) has not², while **S** usually writes clauses in full where **K** often only gives the beginning and the end. Importantly **S** also marks when a clause is new law. **S** is clearly the later manuscript, as it has amendments to clauses in **K**. **K** post-dates 1217, as it contains an amendment to marriage law which can be shown to have been introduced in that year. **S** post-dates 1237 as it lists among its feast days the feast of St Þorlákr's translation which was introduced that year. Apart from this there is no textual evidence for their age, but the style of writing suggests that both must be from the middle or second half of the 13th century. **K** is usually dated to the middle of the 13th century, and **S** to 1260-70.³ There are other manuscripts containing just the Christian Laws Section, dating from the 14th century (see below) and a few other fragments of other parts of the laws, both older (see below) and more recent.

As to the origins of these law texts, there is good evidence that Icelandic civil law was first committed to writing in the winter 1117-18. Ari fróði says in his *Íslendingabók* that the first summer Bergþórr Hrafnsson was lawspeaker [1117], it was decided at the Alþing that the following winter Haflíði Másson, Bergþórr and other wise men should write the law in a book and make amendments to old law as they saw fit. They then wrote the Treatment of Homicide section and 'much else' over the winter. At the Alþing of 1118 this was read out to the Law Council and everyone was very pleased with it and nobody spoke against it.⁴ Nothing is known of how 'much else' Haflíði and company wrote or if they continued their work.⁵ Codification of laws seems however to have been in vogue in the early 12th century because at the end of the Christian Law section it says that it was made by Bishop Þorlákr Rúnólfsson of Skálholt (1118-33) and Bishop Ketill Þorsteinsson of Hólar (1122-45) on the advice of Archbishop Özurr (Asger, Asser) of Lund (1104-37), the priest Sæmundr fróði and many other clerics.⁶ This passage is echoed in *Hungrvaka* which, predictably, ascribes the initiative to Bishop Þorlákr.⁷ The writing of the original Christian Law section must therefore have taken place between 1122 and 1133.

The author of the *First Grammatical Treatise* (written at some time between 1125 and 1175) lists Law first among writings he says have been made in the

¹ Although both codices may be written by the same scribe - Stefán Karlsson 1978, 19-21, 23

² The Assembly Procedures Section, the Wergild Ring List, the Lawspeaker Section, the Law Council Section, much of the Searches Section and the sea law

³ ONPR, 441, 471

⁴ IF I, 23-24

⁵ Ólafur Larússon 1961

⁶ Grg Ia 3623-26

⁷ Bysp I 95

vernacular by his time.¹ This may suggest the interest in, and importance attached to, codification of the law in the first half of the 12th century, but apart from this our only evidence comes from the law texts themselves. A fragment of the Land Claims section dated to ca. 1150x75 is clearly in the same textual tradition as **K** and **S**, but differs considerably in detail.² Another, very mutilated fragment, is preserved, dated to the early 13th century, containing material from the Searches Section and Incapable Persons Section³ but this one accords well with **K**. On these grounds, and the apparently distant relationship between **K** and **S**, it may be assumed that much of the law was recorded in the 12th century.

By the mid 13th century, at least, we have this situation described in the Law Council Section, only found in **K**, where the authority of different law texts is dealt with:

It is also prescribed that in this country what is found in books is to be law. And if books differ, then what is found in the books which the bishops own is to be accepted. If their books also differ, then that one is to prevail which says it at greater length in words that affected the case at issue. But if they say it at the same length but each in its own version, then the one which is in Skála[holt] is to prevail. Everything in the book which Haflíði made is to be accepted unless it has since been modified, but only those things in the accounts given by other legal experts which do not contradict it, though anything in them which supplies what is left out there or is clearer is to be accepted.

If there is argument on an article of law and the books do not decide it, the Law Council must be cleared for a meeting on it.⁴

Thus, by the middle of the 13th century there were many law texts in the country and no *codex receptus*, although the texts kept at Hólar and Skálholt were given pre-eminence. It is of course likely that the bishops recognised the importance of knowing the law, and could therefore be trusted to keep everything that was law in writing. The arrangement also reveals the lack of structure in the Icelandic constitutional order and the strong position the church was in to influence matters. Over law texts in secular hands, the law code made by Haflíði and the law committee of 1117-18 is given precedence, although the text seems to imply that this code only contained parts of the legal corpus.⁵ It is not thought that the extant texts are those of the bishops, but rather

¹ Hreinn Benediktsson ed. 1972: 28.

² AM 315 101 D - printed in Grg Ib 219-26, ONPR, 441.

³ AM 315 101 C - printed in Grg Ib 231-34, Grg III 490-501, ONPR, 441.

⁴ Transl. in LEI, 191. [Þat er oc at þat scolo log vera alande her sem aseram standa. En ef scrár scilfr a oc scal þat hafa er standr á serom þeim er byscopar eigo. Nu scilfr en þeirra scrár á. þa scal sv hafa sitt mal er lengra segir þeim orðum er male scilpa með monnom. En ef þær segja tafr langt oc þo sitt huar þa scal su hafa sitt mal er iscalaholli er. Þat scal alt hafa er finz a sero þeirre er haflíðe let gera nema þocat se síþan en þat eitt at anara log manna fyrir sogn er eigi mæli þui igeign oc hafa þet alt er hitzug leifir eða glöggra er. Nu þræta menn vm logmal oc má þa ryðia logréttu til ef eigi scera scrár ór.] - Grg Ia, 213[5].

⁵ 26

⁵ See Ólafur Larusson 1961.

private compilations of 'legal experts' or other interested parties. Apart from the first official drive to record the law in 1117-18, recording the law seems mainly to have been this kind of private initiative. This leaves us with three different types of origins of the law texts.

One is official revision and codification of orally transmitted law, initiated by the Alþing and formally accepted by it. This is what Haflíði and his committee of legal experts did. It is likely that the compilers of the law books took care to copy everything of this kind.

Another is new laws or amendments recorded at the same time as they were accepted. New law can also have been written as a draft before ratification, as may be assumed was the case with the Christian Law section recorded in 1122x33. Whether that was a revision of an earlier law or a totally new legislation is open to question, although the latter seems more likely.

A third type would be traditions or law that was never officially revised, recorded by the compilers from their own or someone else's memory, or written on the recital of the law by the law speaker, if he really ever did that.¹ There is no direct evidence that this ever happened but the possibility is certainly there.

In addition to this, large parts of our texts may be logical extensions of particular laws, giving examples of what law should be applied, what procedures followed in specific circumstances, made up by the compilers or his sources. The difference between this kind of information and law proper will have been tenuous in orally transmitted law, and there is little reason to give it much significance in the early stages of law recording. Finally it has been suggested that the laws have been influenced by Roman law but this applies as much to the form as the content.²

Scholars agree that *Grágás* is much more literary in style than other Scandinavian law of the same period, that it does not have their terse, alliterative and proverbial style. This is usually taken to indicate that *Grágás* is much less directly derived from the oral tradition and is more the result of revision and legal scholarship in writing.³ *Grágás* is probably a mixture of the three (or four) types of textual origins mentioned above. It will always be difficult to generalise about the nature of the *Grágás* laws, while individual clauses and chapters may contain clues about their origins and it is therefore necessary to consider each clause carefully before it is put to use.

¹ According to the Law Speaker Section he was supposed to recite the Assembly Procedures Section at every Alþing, and a third of the law so that all the law would be recited in three years - Grg 1a, 209-12. See Helgi Skuli Kjalantansson 1986.

² Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1977a. Also 1990b.

³ LEI 15, Grg 1a [1945] xii, Ólafur Lárússon 1958a 132, Stahle 1965, Jonas Kristjánsson 1988 118-19 cf Foote 1977a, 1977b 207, See in general Þorleifur Hauksson & Þórir Oskarsson 1994 224-35 esp 234-35.

The law texts of *Grágás* are therefore not law codes; they are compilations of law, legal tradition, descriptions of procedure, formulas and bits of legal history and knowledge. Some of the clauses were not law at the same time and there is no guarantee that the two principal texts record everything which was considered to be law. All this must be kept in mind when using *Grágás* as a historical source.

Before we leave the subject of medieval laws it is necessary to explain the dating and nature of the Christian laws in *Grágás*.

Both **K** and **S** open with the Christian Law section. In **K** it ends with regulations on fasting followed by the clause on its composition by bishops Þorlákr and Ketill in 1122x33. This is then followed by four amendments, one on fasting, one on impediments to marriage on account of consanguinity, one on the calendar and one on the legality of amendments. The first two amendments are derived from the resolutions of the fourth Lateran and the text says they were introduced when Bishop Magnús Gizurarson (1216-37) had become bishop. The annals date the amendments to 1217 which is probably the first Alþing since Magnús came from Norway.¹ This is as good a *terminus ante quem* as can be asked for. In the Christian law section there is a list of feast days which were to be observed by law.² Among those are the feast days of St Agnes, St Ambrose and St Cecilia which were introduced in 1179³ and the feast day of St Þorlákr which was introduced in 1199.⁴ The time of writing of the Christian Law section in **K** can therefore be argued to be 1199x1217. It is of course possible that nothing was changed except the feast days, but as will be argued in ch. III 3.3-4 it is likely that some of the clauses, particularly those on the management of churches, are from around 1200 or even later. In **S** there is preserved an additional clause which may preserve an earlier stage in the legislation on churches.

Towards the end of **K** there is a special section with legislation regarding the tithe. Regulations on tithes are found in the Christian law section but in this separate section they are much more detailed. The location of this section towards the end of the manuscript where there are also a few clauses which are almost certainly amendments to the Christian law section suggests that it is a late composition. In **S** this section has been added on to the Christian law section and it is likely that it was always intended to go with it (see further in ch. III 2.1).

It is sometimes pointed out that the secular nature of marriage and other spheres of private life and conduct is attested by the fact that these matters are not dealt with in the Christian Law section in *Grágás* but in the Inheritance and Betrothal Sections.

¹ Grg 1a, 36₂₇₋₃₇₁₂. See also DI I, 372-92, IA, 125, 184

² Grg 1a, 30₂₋₃₁₁₉

³ Sturl, 109

⁴ IA, 22, 62, 121, 181, 324

There is however little reason to attach great importance to this. Prior to 1275 the Icelandic church did not have a jurisdiction in 'its' matters. The Christian Law section was as much a part of the secular law as any other and no doubt needed in theory to be accepted by the Law Council as all other law. It may also be added that the content and order of the sections varies considerably between **S** and **K**. The content of sections is therefore to a great extent decided by the compilers and their ideas about structure and organisation. The Christian Laws Section as it is in **K** contains almost exclusively material bearing on the church and religious practice, i.e. those things that were specific to the church and came only into society through it: baptism, maintenance of churches, churchyards, duties and pay of priests, fasts and feast days etc. When the Christian Law section was first composed in 1122x33 there was probably no need felt to make a completely new legislation on matters like marriage. The Old Christian Law section was not church law but secular law about the matters of the church.

The New Christian Law introduced in Skálholt diocese in 1275 by bishop Árni Þorláksson had the status of church law; it established the church's jurisdiction in its own matters and once it had been accepted by the Law Council¹, and presumably the king, it was subject only to changes by the church. Marriage, divorce, incest, wills et c. were now acknowledged to be matters of the church and under its jurisdiction. Accordingly there was no corresponding legislation in the new secular law, first *Járnsíða* introduced in 1271 and, replacing it, *Jónsbók* in 1281.

All this new legislation was the result, on the one hand of the Icelanders' union with Norway in 1262-64, and on the other of a major revision and reshaping of Norwegian legislation initiated by king Magnús *lagabætur* ('law-reformer') Hákonarson (1263-80). Magnús was on good terms with the church and gave in to its demands for a separate jurisdiction. Archbishop Jón *rauði* (1268-68) had a new Christian Law made for Norway which the king then accepted. Bishop Árni shaped his Christian Law on this model, in a similar way as the new Icelandic law-books *Járnsíða* and *Jónsbók* were to a large extent based on Norwegian law. Although bishop Árni's New Christian Law seems to have been accepted by the Law Council, its legal validity remained in some doubt and it was not formally accepted in the northern diocese of Hólar until 1354.² In the meantime the Old Christian Laws Section seems to have been regarded, by some at least, as valid law in matters of the church. It is probably because of this, that we have a number of manuscripts from the 14th century containing the Christian Laws Section of *Grágás*.³ How this law could coexist with *Jónsbók* is not clear, unless chapters from the other sections of *Grágás*, corresponding to those taken up in bishop Árni's New Christian Law, were regarded as a part of this law. A tendency in this direction can be

¹ CI DI II, 125, ÁB, 47

² DI III 98-99

³ Printed in Grg III

seen in these more recent manuscripts,¹ although not to the extent that there could not have been ambiguities.

13.6. Charters²

In the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* some 130 charters of churches (*máldagar*) are dated to the 12th and 13th centuries. Only 2 originals are preserved (*Reykholtsmáldagi* - Þjsks fornskjol VI, and some of the material in *Þingeyrabók* - AM 279 a 4°) and the rest are only found in much more recent transcripts. A much larger collection of church-charters is preserved from the 14th century, and these are also better provenanced and more easily datable. As charters have never been studied as a source-group it is therefore necessary to begin our examination in the firmer ground of the 14th century. It is with church-charters that the following discussion is concerned.

The most comprehensive source of 14th century charter material in the diocese of Skálholt is the collection of charters compiled by Bishop Vilchin Hinriksson (1391-1405), called *Vilchinsbók*.³ The work was started in 1397 and was probably completed soon afterwards. In general the charters in this collection are not the composition of Bishop Vilchin or his administration, but copies of older charters supplemented with additions and comments made by Vilchin on his itineraries. In many of the charters from the Southern quarter explicit reference is made to charters attributed to Bishop Michael (1382-91) and sometimes to charters of Bishop Oddgeirr Þorsteinsson (1365-81). In the charters of the Eastern or Western quarters such references are rarely made, but nevertheless there are indications that these charters are in the main copies of earlier charter versions as well.

Firstly there is a register of charters copied in 1607 from a manuscript called *Hítardalsbók*.⁴ This was a charter collection which seems to have been begun by Bishop Oddgeirr in 1367. The 17th century register contains only the first line of each charter and adds information which was not found in *Vilchinsbók*. Where *Vilchinsbók* is more detailed this is often commented upon but the difference is not illustrated. From the first lines copied in the register it is clear that almost all the charters in *Hítardalsbók* are earlier versions of the charters in *Vilchinsbók*. From the comments on

¹ E.g. provisions on weddings in *Skálholtsbók* - Grg III, 3511 19, corresp. to K - Grg Ib, 399-18, 3924-402

² Cederschiöld 1883, Skovgaard-Petersen 1960 236-43, Smedberg 1973 15, 112, Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1974 153-155, Nilsson 1989 29-30, Orri Vesteinsson 1994

³ The original of *Vilchinsbók* was burnt in Skálholt in 1630, but a copy had been made earlier. The best manuscripts of *Vilchinsbók* are transcripts of this copy which is since lost. A few individual charters which were copied from the original of *Vilchinsbók* are preserved, mainly in AM 263 fol written in 1598. See DI IV, 27-37, where *Vilchinsbók* is also printed on pp. 38-240.

⁴ JS 143 4° is the 1607 register in original, but its missing page can be filled from the 18th century copy Lbs 108 4°. *Hítardalsbók* is printed in DI III, 215-35, 774-76.

additional information it is clear that although *Hítardalsbók* was first written as the charter collection of Bishop Oddgeirr, Bishops Michael and Vilchin also had whole charters and additions to Bishop Oddgeirr's charters written into it. There are for instance two charters of Bishop Vilchin for the churches at Hvoll and Staðarfell in Dalir (SD) dated to 1394 in *Hítardalsbók*. It seems then that *Hítardalsbók* represents the main charter collection used by the Bishops Oddgeirr, Michael and Vilchin, until Vilchin had it transcribed with his additions as *Vilchinsbók* in 1397.¹

Secondly there is a large number of 'stray' charters, which are not preserved as parts of any medieval charter collection, but were collected and copied, mainly into one manuscript AM 268 4to, around 1600. A large number of these are versions of the charters in *Vilchinsbók*, but are clearly older because they list less property than recorded in the charters in *Vilchinsbók*. Usually it is difficult to see if they are earlier than *Hítardalsbók*, because the latter almost never gives the full inventory. These 'stray' charters are dated by the editors of DI to the episcopacies of various bishops in the 14th century, mainly Bishops Jón Halldórsson (1322-39) and Gyrðir Ívarsson (1350-60) as well as Bishop Oddgeirr. Although the individual datings usually have little to recommend them, it seems true that many of these charters date as far back as the first quarter of the 14th century. This can be shown by comparing the few charters which bishops like Jón and Gyrðir are known to have made with the versions found in *Vilchinsbók*. Almost without exception the datable early or mid 14th century charters are clearly earlier versions of the charters found in *Vilchinsbók*. They have the same types of information, the same wording and the same order of clauses. The only things that change is the information concerning property. An example of this is the charter for Sælingsdalstunga (SD) made by Bishop Jón Halldórsson on the 27th of September 1327.² There are three later versions of this charter, which all copy the clauses on conditions and privileges word for word, while adding new and listing more recent endowments. One of these more recent versions is from the middle of the 14th century as it names farmer Jón Sveinsson of Hvammur (SD), then in his later years, who died in 1355.³ The other two later versions are from the second half of the 15th century.⁴ Another example is the charter of Staðarfell (SD) made by Bishop Gyrðir (i.e. in 1350x60).⁵ This charter copies the clauses on conditions and privileges of an earlier

¹ Although a separate charter collection attributed to Bishop Michael is said to have burnt in the fire of Skalholt in 1526 - DI II, 676. The validity of this is uncertain, and it is impossible to ascertain whether this book contained charters in a similar manner as *Hítardalsbók* and *Vilchinsbók* or if it contained records of Bishop Michael's administration - such a book could well have been called *máldagabók*.

² DI II, 633-34.

³ DI III, 103-104, IA, 356 fn 4

⁴ DI V, 100-101, DI VII, 69-70

⁵ DI III, 80

version¹ and either or both are copied in the charters of Bishop Vilchín (one in *Hítardalsbók* (1394) and the other in *Vilchinsbók* (1397)).²

From this it is possible to assume that as some of the charters in *Vilchinsbók* are versions of charters made as early as the 1320s, the same can be true of other charters which predate the versions of charters in *Vilchinsbók*. Putting a date to these earlier versions will however always be difficult, although when 2-3 versions are preserved which predate *Vilchinsbók* and each records additions to the property of the church in question, some decades must be allowed between the making of the earliest and the most recent version.

Another, much smaller, group of 'stray' charters are clearly older than the earliest versions of the charters found in *Vilchinsbók* (i.e. they list less property) and are also different in style and composition (although the information is usually similar). These are the charters which are invariably dated to the 12th and 13th centuries in DI, with little doubt rightly, although again the individual datings are almost always questionable. The important thing to note about these earlier charters is that the majority is not related to the 14th century versions of the charters in *Vilchinsbók*, i.e. the latter are not copies of the former. In the extremely rare cases where there are two or more of these older charters preserved from the same church these are usually not copies of each other either (for instance the two 13th century charters of Skarð (SD)³). This suggests that in the 13th century and earlier no systematic records were kept by the bishops regarding the property and privileges of individual churches, and that when charters were drawn up they were not stored in any sort of accessible archives; it is not even certain that the bishops kept copies; if they did, many of them were clearly not available for copying in the 14th century. Then sometime around or after 1300 concentrated efforts were made to collect charters from all the churches in the diocese and have them written up in a single collection. When this was achieved is difficult to determine. A lost charter collection of Bishop Jón Halldórsson (1322-39)⁴ may represent either the first incomplete fruits of this labour, or a full catalogue of all the church charters in the diocese, on which the later collections were based. Which of the two is closer to the truth we will probably never know. The second quarter of the fourteenth century is a likely period for the first charter collection in Skálholt if we assume that developments were similar there as in the northern diocese of Hólar.

Bishop Auðun *rauði* Þorbergsson (1313-22) had the charters of the majority of the churches in his diocese written into a single collection in 1318. This collection formed the basis of all later 14th and 15th century charter collections in the diocese of

¹ DI II, 637

² DI III, 774, DI IV, 159 cf DI III, 506

³ DI I, 597, DI II, 117

⁴ DI II, 676

Hólar and is still preserved.¹ That this was a novelty in the beginning of the 14th century is suggested by a letter of complaint from 1319 from the farmers of the North to the king. Many of the lesser churches were still private property after the compromise at Ogvaldsnes in 1297 and the farmers were not inclined to let the bishop inquire into their finances and complained bitterly about Bishop Auðun's high-handedness in his administration of (private) church property.²

Although similar registration may have been taking place in the southern diocese at this time (i.e. around 1320) it is unlikely that it was achieved in one go as in the North. There is a striking difference between the charter collections of the two dioceses in that the charters in Bishop Auðun's collection are clearly all the product of a single mind; the same information is always dealt with in the same order and in the same way. This kind of homogeneity is not found in the charter collections of the southern diocese. There are certain conventions as to the general order of the clauses and what information is included, but within that framework there are considerable differences in the ways information is conveyed and arranged. For instance there are three main methods of describing parish size, not including when it is not mentioned at all, which is not uncommon. Firstly, the number of farms which pay tithes to the church may be given. This is the most common method and the rule in the northern charters. Secondly the names of all the farms which pay tithes to the church may be given, and thirdly the names of the farms in the extremes of the parish may be given with a comment that all the farms between these locations pay tithes to the church. A variant of the last method is to name rivers, promontories or mountains which form the parish boundaries. This suggests that the earliest 14th century charter versions of different churches in the Skálholt diocese were written by different people, probably at different times, which in turn suggests that the collection of all the charters into one catalogue was only achieved in more than one bishop's period of office.

Once copied into a bishop's charter collection in the early or mid 14th century the individual charters become almost petrified, and subsequent copies differ only in the additional endowments and in adding calculations of the *portio ecclesiae*, which in the southern diocese is a late 14th century feature of charters. In the present state of research it is impossible to assert that no attempts were made to homogenise the charters of the southern diocese. If such attempts were made they were clearly not successful, but it would be important to establish if schools or traditions can be discerned in early charter making and if they can be tied in with datable charters. If that is possible it would on the one hand put the datings of a large number of charters on a sounder footing and on the other facilitate understanding of the boom in centralised record keeping which has been suggested here. Based on the meagre evidence

¹ In later copies. It is printed in DI II, 425-89

² DI II, 489-91

available, this boom has been dated here to the first decades of the 14th century. There are however many questions unanswered regarding this, and the development can well have begun as early as the 1270's and may not have been completed until the 1360's.

For the present purposes however, it suffices to note that until the late 13th century, if not longer, the bishops seem only to have been in possession of fragmentary information regarding the conditions, property and privileges of the churches they were supposed to supervise, and this must have seriously affected their ability to put into effect any sort of administration of parish churches or their affairs.

The editors of *Diplomatarium Islandicum* have dated 34 charters of 27 churches and 6 hospices to the 12th century. These mention between them 51 churches, half-churches and chapels. Only one of the charters is an original and five make reference to people who are known from the 12th century. The dating of the rest is mostly informed guesswork based it seems on ideas of how active different bishops were (the majority is dated to St Þorlákr's episcopacy) and to some extent on the antiquity of style and language, although this is never explicated. Most of the datings are highly suspicious, but a reinterpretation would require a study of its own and will not be attempted here. The only thing that can be said to be certain is that all these charters, along with those dated to the 13th century, are clearly older than the earliest charter collections of the 14th century

The charters which have been dated to the 12th century are preserved mainly in two manuscripts compiled in Skálholt around 1600.¹ Both are obviously collections of single or small groups of charters that were still lying about at the see and were different from the large compilations of 1397 and 1575. The reason they were still lying about suggests that they still had some value, at least in the preceding century or two. This is strongly suggested by the charters themselves in that the information they contain is in its main aspects exactly the same as in other charters preserved for these churches in the 14th century charter collections. The difference lies in the formulaic style and somewhat different approach in certain aspects; e.g. the entries on burial rights and priest's fee are more wordy and complicated than is usual in later charters, although the import remains similar if not the same. Some of the earlier charters mention the rights of *fundatores* and liability in case of fire or other damage. As argued in ch III 3-4 this becomes uncommon in later charters and is probably a late 12th and early 13th century feature. In some of these older charters the names are given of people whose descendants' paupers had to be fed by the church. The names are sometimes omitted in later charters, probably because too much time had elapsed for descent to be relevant or investigable. The similarities are nevertheless much

¹ 23 in Þjsks Bps A II 1, 9 in AM 263 fol, 5 of them also in the first named manuscript, 5 in AM Fasc LXXII, no 1 and one in the original Þjsks fornskjal VI)

greater than the differences. The numbers of priests attached to a church are always the same; so is the number of tithe paying farms and the number of chapels and half-churches. The only bits of information that may be slightly different are those regarding property, although they are never radically different.

The conclusion we reach with these alleged 12th century charters is therefore that they are undoubtedly old and older than the oldest charter collection. That gives however only a relative dating and in the current state of research it is impossible to give a more precise dating for the bulk of them than pre-1300. Many of the alleged 12th century charters could therefore well be from the 13th century, and vice versa for that matter. Secondly the fact that the content of these charters is in all major aspects the same as in the more recent ones makes them suspicious, especially considering the constant rewriting and copying more recent charters can be shown to have gone through.

There are four charters which contain references to 12th century people, one records the establishment by Tanni and his wife of a hospice at Bakki (B) in Bishop Gizurr's time (1082-1118)¹ and is attached to another which records the endowment of the church at Staðarhraun (B) by the same couple in the time of Bishop Þorlákr² (presumably Rúnólfsson 1118-33); one charter records the establishment of a *staðr* in Staffholt (B), by the priest Steini Þorvarðarson who was alive in 1143 and another the establishment of a *staðr* in Húsafell (B) by Brandr Þórarinnsson in or shortly after Bishop Ketill's time (1152-76)³ Finally there is another charter of Staðarhraun recording that it has become a *staðr* and that its control was to be in the hands of Tanni's descendants.⁴ In addition there is a charter of Reykholt in the original which lists property belonging to the church in ca. 1150x1204.⁵

The Reykholt charter is very different from the others, it is only a list of property to which later additions and names of donors have been subjoined. It seems to fit well the intentions of a clause in the Old Christian Law section where it is required that a church owner record the endowments to his church and advertise it at assemblies and once a year at his church.⁶ A similar charter for Kirkjubær on Síða (VS) was ratified by the Law Court in 1216x26.⁷

The Húsafell charter on the other hand is principally about the establishment of the *staðr* and the conditions of its control in Brandr's family. As it is primarily about

¹ DI I, 169 in Þjsks Bps A II I, 63r¹ ⁸ written in 1601. It is usually assumed that this is Ferjubakki in Mýrar (B). It is also conceivable that this is Alltárakki in Myrar (B), where there was a chapel - PP, 135.

² DI I, 174, in Þjsks Bps A II I, 62v, written in 1601.

³ DI VII, 1-2, in Þjsks Bps A II I, 70v-71v, written in 1501.

⁴ DI I, 278-79, in Þjsks Bps A II I, 104r-104v, written in 1601.

⁵ DI I, 279-80, Reykjaholts-máldagi 18⁵-18⁸, in Þjsks fornskjöl VI 1r¹-1⁴, - ONPR, 494.

⁶ Grg 1a, 159-19, cf Grg 1b, 218-11-18.

⁷ DI I, 394-95.

arrangements concerning the church and not about property¹ and Brandr is known to have lived in the second half of the 12th century² there is no reason to suspect that this charter is more recent or not authentic. Two other charters, those of Hítarnes (B)³ and Saurbær in Hvalfjarðarstrond (B),⁴ share many characteristics with the Húsafell charter and are probably from the same period.

The charters of Húsafell and Reykholt are, each in its different way, distinct from the later charter tradition, the earliest representatives of which are the charters of Bishop Sígvarðr Þéttmarsson of Skálholt (1238-68).⁵ While charters of the Reykholt type are concerned only with listing the property of the church and those of the Húsafell type with clarifying the rights and responsibilities of those who control the property, the mid 13th century charters are primarily about the pastoral aspect of the church; defining the tithe area and other fiscal interests of the church, burial rights, the priest's fee and the priest's obligations as well as the lighting of the church.

The charters of Staðarhraun and Stafholt fall between these three types. They could of course make up a type of their own, it is quite likely that charters came in several forms before the bishops began to try to standardise them in the 14th century, and the examples of the other types are not numerous enough to preclude that there could be yet others. There are however features in these charters which make them suspicious.

The charter of Stafholt begins by listing in considerable detail the property which Steini the priest donated. It then gives the number of the clerics which are to be attached to the church and maintained from its property and adds that there shall be one less priest if there was a priest at the church in Hjarðarholt because that church was subject to Stafholt. There then follows a clause on two female incapable persons from Steini's kin who were to be maintained by the church. This clause does not seem to have been written while Steini was still alive. Steini the priest was alive in 1143 and was dead sometime before the 1180s when a certain Eyjólfur Þorgeirsson (d. 1213) was living there. The endowment must have taken place in the intervening period, probably earlier rather than later. If this charter is, as it is preserved, an authentic 12th century document this would be the earliest evidence for the ranking of churches and the emergence of a parochial structure with central churches and satellites. It is quite conceivable that this had begun to develop in the middle of the 12th century but there are reasons not to accept the evidence of this charter without reservations.

On the one hand it is suspicious that in the almost 250 years that are supposed to have passed between the composition of this charter and the recording of the church's

¹ The last clauses have almost certainly been added later, probably in the 14th or 15th centuries

² IF V, 277, HMS I, 296-97 cf 294-95

³ DI I, 275-76

⁴ DI I, 265

⁵ DI I, 592-594-596 Also Abbot Brandr's charter of Guludalur from the same period - DI I, 519

charter in *Vilchinsbók* not a single new piece of property has come into the possession of the church, in fact a piece of forest is missing from the charter in *Vilchinsbók*.¹ It is not inconceivable that the church did not acquire new property in such a long period but it is highly unusual, especially for such a wealthy church. On the other hand this charter, or some version close to it, has clearly been in the hands of the author of *Oddaverja þáttur* who quotes from it that Steini had not made provisions for the control of the *staðir* after his day but had reserved the right of two incapable females of his kin to be supported by the church.² It is a remarkable coincidence that such a rare comment on a founder's arrangements for his church should be based on one of the very few charters which survive from the 12th century. It might suggest that charters were still very rare when *Oddaverja þáttur* was written - the 1270s as a time of writing is suggested in ch. III 3 4 - so that the contents of the few that existed were well known. It is however more likely that the preservation of this charter is in some way connected with the author of *Oddaverja þáttur*, which in turn suggests that it was connected to the cause of Bishop Árni Þorláksson (1269-98) who campaigned for ecclesiastical control over church property. Bishop Árni's fortunes waxed and waned and in 1284 they were at a low point. Letters from King Eiríkr (1280-99) had arrived in Iceland giving laymen the right to reclaim *staðir* which Bishop Árni had taken control of. At a meeting in Brautarholt (K) Árni had to concede defeat, but having scrutinised the king's letter he claimed that it only allowed heirs of founders of *staðir* to reclaim control of their inheritance:

If a proof cannot be found that [the church property] is heritable,
 or if the charge has been transferred from the [fundator's] family through sale or marriage
 or if men claim *staðir* which have been bought by them or their predecessors
 or if those who had earlier received them [as benefice] from the bishop now forward such a
 claim in the name of the king
 or if they had earlier released control to the bishop of their own free will
 or if [those *staðir* are claimed] which were appointed by the bishops in the times of Archbishop
 Sigurðr [1231-52] and King Hákon [1217-63] and the bishops have controlled for more than
 30 years or where religious houses have been,
 Then we do not find these mentioned in the letter.³

¹ DI IV 188-90. Also an earlier version in DI III, 88-89. The forest is mentioned in the last clause of the earliest charter and may be a later addition. Pasture mentioned in the same clause is however also enumerated in the 14th century charters.

² Bsk I, 285.

³ [Enn ef ekki finst skilorded til að j ætt skule ganga eða ur ættenne hafa geinged vardvertsland med saulum eður kvennagiptingum eður þeir kalle til stada sem med tie hafa keypt eður þeirra fyrer menn eður þeir kalle nu til med kongs valld, er med biskops valld voru j setter, eður þeir sem staltviliande hafa uppgefet j biskops valld, eður þeir sem biskopar hafa skipad a dogum Sigurdar erchebiskops og Hakonar kongs, og jafnann biskop fyrer raded meir enn xxx veira eða klaustur hafa a staded, þa finnum ver hvorge þessara til kall j bretenu.] - AB 97. See also: 23, 101.

This atmosphere must have been conducive for the making of charters on both sides of the conflict and it will certainly have been helpful for Bishop Árni's cause if he could prove that Steini had deliberately left the control of Stafholt unresolved, which in the late 13th century would mean, that he had not left it to his heirs but to the bishop. The interest in Stafholt in particular is obvious; not only was it one of the wealthiest *staðir* in the country but it had been in the hands of the leader of the lay opposition to Bishop Árni, Hrafn Oddsson (d. 1289), around 1270 and was one of the *staðir* reclaimed after the meeting in Brautarholt.¹ These circumstances make it necessary to be suspicious of the Stafholt charter although it will never be possible to prove whether or to what extent it was a forgery. The position taken here is to accept that Steini the priest was the *fundator* and that it was a wealthy foundation but that the charter itself may be a more recent composition and is not acceptable as evidence for mid 12th century charter making.

An even stronger case can be made for being suspicious of the charters of Staðarhraun.² The charter of Bakki is appended to the earlier charter of Staðarhraun and it is simplest to treat them as one document. This charter is hereafter referred to as A₁ (Staðarhraun) and A₂ (Bakki) and the other as B. A is supposedly earlier than B because it gives only half the land at Staðarhraun to the church while B has the whole homestead. At first glance it would therefore seem that Tanni and Hallfríðr had donated half the land in the 1120s and that the other half was donated sometime later in the 12th century. There are however too many discrepancies between the two charters for this to be acceptable

Lands: While A₁ has only half the land at Staðarhraun, B has the whole land and another one at nearby Bruarfoss

Livestock: A₁ has 16 cows but B has 12. A has 10 oxen but B has none. Both versions have 60 wethers and in addition B has 60 sheep. A₁ has 3 horses but B has 2 horses or 1,5 hundred of home-spun. It is possible that xii is a misreading for xv or even xvi which may explain the difference in the number of cows, but it is still strange that 10 oxen and a horse have disappeared from the church and 60 sheep come instead. That is only 6 cow-values instead of 11 if a value reckoning from around 1200 is used.³

Ornaments and utensils: The value of utensils in both charters is the same (A₁ 2 hundreds in 4 ell ounce units, B 8 hundred ells) while B lists the same ornaments and adds several others

Incapable persons: Only A₁ has the maintenance of an incapable female and an incapable male in case there is no deacon

Hospice: Only A₁ has the duty of the householder to feed and keep travellers overnight

Bridges: Only B has the duty to maintain bridges over Hítará and Grjótá.

Service: Only B states how many masses are to be sung

Lighting: Only B states on which days lights are to be kept in the church

Tithe area: Only A₁ states that Bishop Þorlák identified 14 farms from which he wished tithes to

¹ ÁB, 23, 102

² DI I, 169, 174, 278-79

³ Grg 1b, 246-48

be paid to Staðarhraun B has nothing on the tithe area. It is usually assumed that this is Bishop Þorlákr Rúnólfsson (1118-33) but as this is the last clause in the charter it is not inconceivable that it was added in St Þorlákr's time as bishop of Skálholt (1178-93)

Control: Both charters have unambiguous provisions on the control of the church property and it is therefore remarkable that they are diametrically opposed. A₁ has the control of the bishop in Skálholt and reserves no influence for Tanni and Hallfríðr or their kin while B states that Staðarhraun is an inheritable *staðr* and the bishop shall choose the most able from Tanni's kin. In A₂ it says that Tanni and Hallfríðr made their donation on the advice of Bishop Gizurr and with the consent of their heirs. It also states that Tanni shall be in control of the property as long as he lives but after his day it was to revert to the bishop of Skálholt.

Many of the differences between the charters could be explained by each version being the product of a different age and that the earlier charter had not been available to the writer of the later one. The main reason for thinking A to be earlier than B is that it has less land and less ornaments and that it refers to Tanni and Hallfríðr in the present tense whereas B refers to Tanni's heirs. If this holds it is however extraordinary and unique that there is a considerable reduction in livestock belonging to the church from A₁ to B and that the incapable persons disappear. It could be argued that these had never been established and had been forgotten by the time B was written or that they were removed in exchange for the donation of the rest of the homestead to the church, and the maintaining of two bridges can have come instead of the hospice duties. There are no other examples of such dealings and in case of the incapable persons this is highly unlikely because to the *fundatores* and their kin the maintenance of a relative by the church was a right and not a liability.

What is however particularly unconvincing about A is the clauses on control. In ch. III 3.4 it is argued that *ius patronatus* or the idea that the church-owner held his property as a vassal of God was introduced in Iceland not earlier than the 1160s and that it was only following the general acceptance of this understanding that the bishops began, slowly at first, to claim control over churches. The control-clauses in both A and B are in style and phraseology clearly in the same scribal tradition as the late 12th to mid 13th century charters discussed in ch. III 3.2 and III 3.4. The differences are mainly that both A and B are unusually clear; B is the only example known to me of a charter using the concept *erfdarstaðr* (lit. = heritable *staðr*); a concept which is otherwise only found in late 13th century contexts.¹ The information in A₂ that Tanni and Hallfríðr had their heirs' consent for the donation is also unique in charters and may suggest that the composer was conscious of the legal requirement to this effect² and thought that it would look authentic in a supposedly early 12th century charter. If this holds, the clauses on control in both charters, but A in particular, must be considered to be anachronistic and like the Stafholt charter it is not unreasonable to assume that the forgery had something to do with Bishop Árni's claims to church property in the late 13th century. Staðarhraun was among the *staðir* reclaimed after the meeting in

¹ JA, 260, 383

² Grg Ib, 218₁₂ Probably a 13th century amendment

Brautarholt in 1284¹ by a householder who may have been a descendant of Tanni. The phraseology of B would have suited him perfectly and it is possibly a late 13th century composition, possibly an older charter with an unambiguous clause on control added as a response to claims like those Bishop Árni issued in Brautarholt. As for A it seems to be an attempt of some ingenious clerk or ally of Árni's to prove that the original intentions of Tanni and Hallfríðr had been in accordance with 13th century ideas on the ownership of church property

As in the case of the Stafholt charter it cannot be considered safe to accept these charters from Staðarhraun as authentic 12th century documents. The forgeries may however have been based on authentic documents or genuine tradition and there is no reason to suspect that Tanni and Hallfríðr did not make these endowments in the early 12th century.

Rejecting the charters of Staðarhraun and Stafholt it seems then that in the 12th century there could be two different types of charter, one, the Reykholt type, which was essentially a deed of property transfers with a clear legal status, and another, the Húsafell type, which was a record of the institutional arrangements agreed upon by bishop and church-owner. The function of both seems primarily to have been to guard the rights of church-owners. It is only from the mid 13th century onwards that the bishops begin to dictate terms and govern the composition of charters according to their agendas. It is only then that the pastoral aspect of the churches enters into the charters.

Charters were being drawn up in the last quarter of the 12th century, but whether charter making became established practice in the 12th century is difficult to say. The scarcity of surviving charters does not suggest it did, although the low number may be more correctly interpreted as a result of the private nature of early charter making. The majority of the surviving charters have survived in copies kept at the episcopal sees.

An aspect of the charters which has caught scholars' attention is their legal validity. It is one of the characteristics of the Icelandic charter material that individual charters are not authenticated in any way, no witnesses are mentioned and in no sense do they look like formal legal documents. Yet it has been assumed that the charters were intended to hold up in court.² This assumption is based on overconfidence in 12th and 13th century trust in the written word. There is in fact nothing, neither in the laws nor in the charters themselves, which suggests that they were accorded such a value.

According to the Old Christian law section those who had charge of churches were supposed to write down what property had been donated to their church and have

¹ ÁB, 102

² Skovgaard-Petersen 1960 236-43 (esp 243), Cf Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1974 153-55

this declared at the Law Rock or in the Law Court or at their spring assembly. It was also to be declared at the church itself once a year when the greatest number attended.¹

Confirmation that this was actually done is found in only five charters: an early charter of Álftamýri in Arnarfjörður (V),² a charter of Kirkjubær in Síða (VS) from 1216x26 which seems to be the actual document which was ratified.³ A charter of Viðey (K) from 1226x29 also seems to be such a document.⁴ A charter of Holt in Eyjafjallasveit (R) from 1258x1302 which is largely made up of older documents, and mentions a permission by Bishop Magnús Gizurarson (1216-37) to celebrate the feast of St John the Baptist's passion and fast the previous day which was declared in the Law Court by Ólafr Hjörleifsson who was abbot of Helgafell (SD) 1258-1302.⁵ In an early charter of Rauðilækur in Ingólfshofðahverfi (A) it is explained that coastal rights are not enumerated because none had been added since the church's property was last declared in the Law Court.⁶

Máldagi in Icelandic originally meant 'contract' and only later began to mean 'charter' or 'deed'⁷ and in the cases of Álftamýri, Holt and Rauðilækur it is therefore not certain whether the actual documents were read out in and ratified by the Law Court, or if only the contents had been announced there. In order for any kind of property transfer to be legally valid it had to be declared at an assembly,⁸ but there are no indications that it was common to commit such transactions to writing until the late 14th century. The charters of Kirkjubær and Viðey are both products of extraordinary circumstances, both were important ecclesiastical institutions and the charters record decisions with major financial implications. The charter of Kirkjubær was drawn up in connection with a court case where the control of the *staðr* was awarded to the bishop of Skálholt, and the one of Viðey when it was decided to levy cheese dues on every farmer between Reykjanes and Botnsá (K) for the newly founded monastery. Whereas these two records are the earliest examples of the production of formal and legally valid documents by the church, they are at the same time the last relics of a vanishing

¹ Grg 1a, 15v-19.

² [En sía máldage er nu hafþr j logretto] - DI I, 371-72

³ [Þessi máldagi var hafðr j logrettu næsta svmar eptir er staðar forræðin voru dæmd biskupi þeim er j skalaholti er oc þess tíar lvtar oc vottar at neindir síðan] - DI I, 394-95

⁴ [Sa máldagi var gíorr a alþinge at raðe Magnus biskop en Snorre Sturluson hafðe vpp j logrettu oc neinde vatta] - DI I, 496

⁵ [þat var logrettubort at Olafi abota] - DI II, 84-85 Cf. Grg III 36 and on the rising cult of St John the baptist in Iceland in the late 13th century, see Gjerløw 1962b

⁶ [Vn staðar tíorur er at þvi eigi greint ad þer einar eru er ædur eru i logrettu haldar. Enn þer viðkomu er langanes fylgia] - DI I 248-49. Langanes was a farm which had apparently been recently added to the church's property. The verb *viðkoma* means then 'add to'

⁷ OGNS s.v. *máldagi*, Magnus Mar Larusson 1966b 264, Sveinbjörn Rannsórn 1974 153. Vilhjálmur Finsen's assertion that the meaning 'charter' (Den paa Pergament skrevne Fortegelse over Gaver til Kirke) is attested in *Grágás* - Grg III, 650-51, is debatable, *at þera máldaga til þings* - Grg 1a, 15 - does not have to refer to the physical transportation of the parchment, it may simply mean 'bring the matter to an assembly' cf. *þer i logréttu*

⁸ E.g. Grg 1b 7610-16.

custom. In the last chapter of the *Konungsbók* version of *Grágás* there is this amendment:

When men endow churches on the advice of the bishops and with the consent of the heirs it is to be honoured as if it was permitted in the Law Court When the bishops want to make contracts on someones' land they have permission not to announce it at the Logberg unless they want to But they shall have it declared in þingbrekka at the spring assembly which they attend and have witnesses the following spring¹

Here endowments of churches are exempted from the normal legal procedure of transferring property. The clause indicates that by whatever time this clause was introduced, endowments of churches were considered different from other gifts of property. This clause may also indicate that formally ratified charters were not considered necessary, possibly because the verbal testimony of witnesses was always considered more reliable. That was probably the norm, but it seems that the charters as they are preserved - un-sealed, un-ratified and un-authenticated - nevertheless were considered to be legally binding and valid documents in court. In 1367 Þorbjörn Hognason testified ... that 60 winters ago and before that many times he often read and heard read the charter of the church at Strond in Selvogur ...' (Á) relating its content and adding that he knew that the church bells had been bought with the consent of Bishop Árni (either 1269-98 or 1304-20).² This is a testimony to the contents of a charter and no mention is made of whether there were seals attached to it or of any other proofs that it was authentic. If it had any, or if it was important, it would surely have been mentioned.

The indications are therefore that the charters themselves were never considered to be legally valid documents. This is of course entirely consistent with the practice in Western Europe in the early and high-middle ages. It remains to be investigated but it seems that the Icelandic courts only began to make use of legally valid documents in the 14th century. The charters discussed here can be regarded as evidence for the foregoing development where charters were made to record announcements and resolutions which had legal meaning. The records themselves had primarily an administrative purpose and the reason that they remain so few until the late 13th century must be that it was only then that an administration was in place which could make use of them.

¹ [Þar er menn legia fe til kirkna at byscopa raðe oc at erlingia sátt þa a þat tafnt fast at halda sem ilogretto se lotat Þat er byscopum lotat þar er þeir vilia gera máldaga ilond manna at þeir scolo eigi lya lata at logbergi nema þeir vili En þingbrecco scolo þeir lata til segia a var þingi þui er þeir heyia oc haia vatta við et nesta varet eþur] - Grg Ib, 21811-18. In the *Staðarhólsbók* version this clause is incorporated into the Old Christian Law section - Grg II, 582 8, and a part of it in the Inheritance section - Grg II, 985 8

² [Þorbjörn Hognason bar so fallinn witrnsburd ad tyrer lx vetra oc adur optstinnis las hann optliga oc heyrdi lesinn kirkju máldaga a Strond j Selvoghi] - DI III, 212



II PREHISTORY

II 1. The conversion¹

The conversion of the Icelanders is one of the really strange events in the history of Christian missions; without much coercion or help from outside the Icelanders decided at their annual assembly, the Alþing, to become Christian in the year 999 or 1000.

At least two missions had been sent to Iceland in the late 10th century, one apparently by Archbishop Adaldag of Hamburg-Bremen in the 980s, which seems to have had very little effect,² and another in 997 by the Norwegian missionary king Ólafr Tryggvason. His envoy, the priest Þangbrandr, was not a very tactfull man and while he appears to have had some success he also seems to have antagonised many.³ In a change of tactics in the year 999/1000 King Ólafr took as hostages a few Icelanders who were staying in Norway, and sent two converted chieftains to Iceland with the message that he would like the Icelanders to convert. At the general assembly of that summer divisions arose among the householders and chieftains, and the two parties declared that each would have its own law and have nothing to do with the other. It was immediately felt that this would be impossibly complicated in practice, and after some deliberation the leader of the pagan party declared that they should all become Christians, but that pagan practices such as infanticide and eating horse-flesh would still be allowed, as would sacrifices to the pagan gods, as long as they were done in private.⁴

The source for this is Ari fróði's *Íslendingabók* from 1122x33. All other accounts are much later and do not seem to derive material on the conversion itself from any other source.⁵ Ari's source was Teitr (d. 1110) who was a son of Iceland's first native bishop, Ísleifr Gizurarson (1056-80) and brother of the second Gizurr Ísleifsson (1082-1118). Teitr was born in the middle of the 11th century and had no doubt known

¹ Maurer 1855-56 I, 411-43, Bjorn M. Ólsen 1900, Finnur Jónsson 1901, Magnús Jónsson 1921a, Einar Arnorsson 1930b, 1941, 1942, 105-16, Sigurður Nordal 1942, 200-203, Bjorn Sigtússon 1944, 43-47, Jon Johannesson 1956, 151-66, Ólafía Einarsdóttir 1964, 52-54, 1967, Sigurður Línal 1974b, 236-48, Stromback 1975, Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1977b, 1979b, Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1978, 66-72, Duwel 1978; Jón H. Adalsteinsson 1971, 1978, Byock 1990, 138-43, Mundal 1990, Fíðjestøl 1991, Sørensen 1993, 87-89.

² ÍF I, 18, Maurer 1855-56 I, 201-26, Sigurður Línal 1974b, 236, Þiebenga 1984.

³ ÍF I, 14, MHN, 19-20, Maurer 1855-56 I, 382-410, Sigurður Línal 1974b, 236-38.

⁴ ÍF I, 14-17. St. Ólafr is in his saga credited with having convinced the Icelanders to abandon these practices, i.e. before 1030. ÍF XXVII, 74, 77, 214, ÓSHS, 105, 110-11, 325.

⁵ The other accounts are *Historia de antiquitate regum norwagensium* - MHN, 21, *Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar* - SOT, 122-30, ÓST II, 188-98, ÍF XXVI, 347, *Krisni saga* - ASB XI, 36-42, and *Njáls saga* - ÍF XII, 269-72.

people who remembered the conversion. Ari's tale is therefore likely to be a credible tradition but it is clearly a well moulded tradition and cannot be read as an accurate account of what happened. We have little choice but to accept that the Icelanders did convert around 1000, possibly under pressure from Norway, and that the decision was taken by the leaders of men at the Alþing and that this decision was effectual enough for an Icelandic bishop-elect to turn up in Bremen fifty years later.¹ That delay does however also suggest that there was not in Iceland, at the time of the conversion, a Christian party ready to take political advantage of their victory.

An interesting aspect of Ari's tale is that to him the conversion was not so much a matter of salvation as political unity; the drama of the tale revolves not around the eternal well-being of Icelandic souls² but about whether they were capable of taking big decisions like these without the fragile political system disintegrating. The account is primarily an illustration of effective crisis management where wisdom and cool-headedness conquer the forces of strife and dissension. It may be that this interest tells us more about the preoccupations of high-powered churchmen in the early 12th century than the actual proceedings at the Alþing a good century earlier. The core of Ari's tale however remains credible; it seems that there was no great opposition to the introduction of Christianity and the matter seems to have been settled more or less peacefully.

This is the most intriguing aspect of the conversion and it has occasioned the spending of vast amounts of scholarly calories. Explanations have been forwarded claiming that the Icelanders were so well acquainted with Christianity as a result of their journeys from Norway through the British isles to Iceland, a century earlier, that the conversion was almost a formality. This explanation is contradicted by the archaeological evidence which suggests that in the 10th century burial practices at least were thoroughly heathen. Others suggest that the decision to convert was primarily a sign of political shrewdness; that the Icelanders knew that Christianity was winning through in the neighbouring countries and that conscious of being a potential outback they converted so as to keep abreast of developments.

All such explanations are superfluous because we cannot know what import the decision to convert had for people around 1000; the tendency is to attribute to the people at the assembly some understanding of the momentous significance of the decision whereas there is more reason to think that an official change of religion held no great significance for those involved and was probably not expected to affect people's lives greatly.³ That it did not is supported by the slow development of Christian institutions in the 11th century

¹ Adam IV, 36, ÍFI, 20-21

² It is of course implied.

³ Sigurður Línal 1974b. 248

The point on which the story of the conversion is revealing is the political organisation of the Icelanders around 1000. The history of the conversion of the peoples of Northern and Eastern Europe is the history of fledgeling state structures taking form through association with the church and by overcoming organised opposition to the new religion. Religion is an excellent cause to unite around and Christianity in particular forces people to take a stance either for or against it. The clear-cut nature of the issue meant that it was an ideal issue from which ambitious chieftains, princes and every kind of king and would-be-king could make political capital. That this did not happen in Iceland suggests that the country's political organisation had not even reached the point where it began to pay to force one's will on unrelated people.

The story of the Christianisation of Iceland is the story of how the church aided the development of impersonal power structures.

II 2. The early bishops

The history of Icelandic Christianity well into the 12th century is dominated by one family. Not only were the first two bishops, Ísleifr and his son Gizurr, of the Haukdælir themselves, but all the bishops until Bishop Klængr of Skálholt from 1152 and Bishop Brandr of Hólar from 1163, can be shown to have had close connections with the Haukdælir,¹ and must have owed their careers at least partly to the family's influence. Whereas the family's overpowering influence over the church by 1100 is beyond doubt, it is largely unknown why and how it came to exert that influence. Our only indisputable fact is that in Bremen on Whit Sunday 1056 a priest called Ísleifr Gizurarson, a son of an Icelandic chieftain and a pupil of a Saxon convent, was consecrated missionary bishop to Iceland.² Was this Ísleifr's private ambition, or had Christianity become so important to the Icelanders that one or many of the chieftains realised it was time to have their own bishop and asked Ísleifr to do the job? Was Ísleifr the only presentable churchman in the country or were there others who could have sought nomination?

The problem is not only that all our sources are written with hindsight in periods when the developing church and the Haukdælir must have been seen as inseparable but also that the two main sources, Ari's *Íslendingabók* and the later *Hungrvaka*, were both written under the aegis of the Haukdælir. Ari's main source for the conversion story and

¹ For the sake of clarity the whole family from the primary settler Ketilbjörn *gamli* will be called Haukdælir, although strictly speaking that term only applies to Teitr Ísleifsson (d. 1110) who was the first of the kindred to live at Haukadalur (A), and his descendants. The term for the earlier generations down to Bishop Gizurr, Teitr's brother, is Mostellingar.

² 26 May - Bekker-Nielsen 1960

the subsequent development of the church, was Teitr son of Bishop Ísleifr and brother of Bishop Gizurr. *Hungrvaka's* main source for the history of the bishops of Skálholt was Gizurr Hallsson, Teitr's grandson and leader of the family. There is no special reason to think that the authors or Teitr or Gizurr were deliberately trying to hide relevant facts in order to make the Haukdælir's part in the making of the Icelandic church look larger. They did not need to. Firstly it is only natural to expect these men to have been unconsciously biased towards their own family and/or patrons, and secondly the success of the Haukdælir being already established, it was that which was interesting and needed explaining. And in explaining their success it was natural for these men to direct their attentions towards the positive events which best illuminated the development. As a result we are presented with a simple sequence of causation: Bishop Ísleifr's father, Gizurr *hvíti*, is baptised by a missionary in 998. Two years later he is one of the main protagonists of conversion and soon puts his mind to reinforce Christianity and sends his son abroad to be educated. The son in due course, having shown his ability, is asked by the public to become their bishop.

Whereas this may all be true in some sense, the political and social reality behind each of these events is hidden from us. This sequence of causation is too simple for us to draw any conclusions from it regarding the nature of the early Icelandic church or how society reacted to it. We can neither assume that the Icelandic church was conceived entirely by the Haukdælir, nor that other families could have been influential in the development. As will be shown below there is some evidence which suggests that other families were actively interested in the church but also that there are good grounds to believe that the Haukdælir were just the kind of family which could make use of an institution like the church.

II 2.1 *The Haukdælir and Bishop Ísleifr*¹

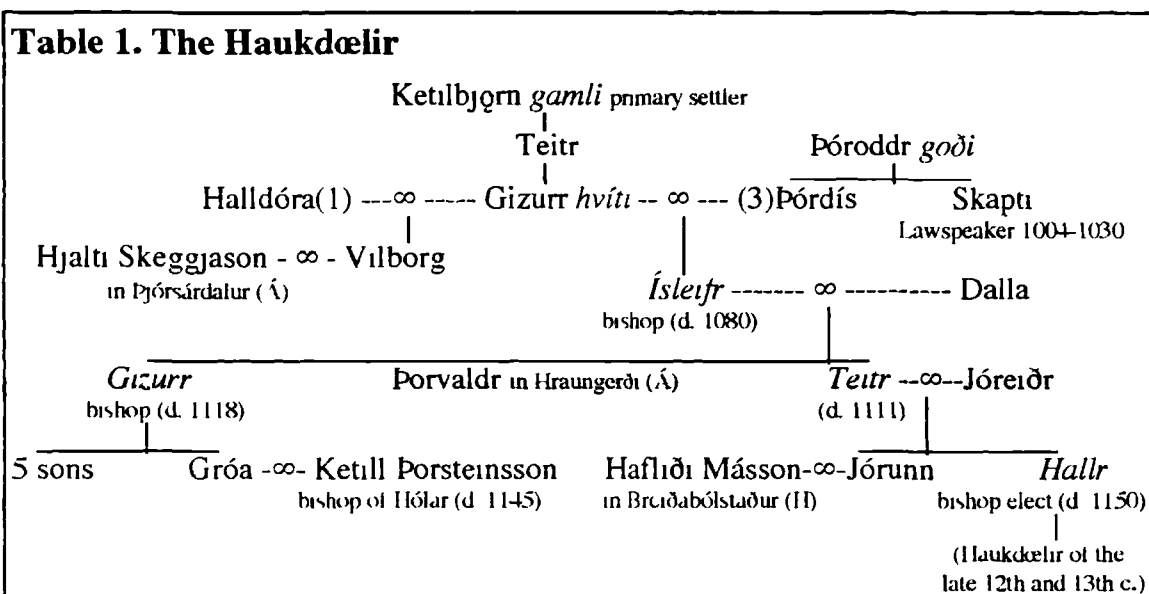
In his *Íslendingabók* Ari *fróði* names six missionary bishops active in Iceland in the 11th century.² *Hungrvaka* also lists these and adds information on them extracted from Adam of Bremen. The earliest date that can be attached to any of these is 1020; Bjarnharðr *bókvísi* was sent by king Ólafr to minister to the Icelanders and was in the country five years according to *Hungrvaka*.³ From 1030 onwards there was always at

¹ Ásmundur Guðmundsson 1943, Jón Jóhannesson 1956 167-75, Kohne 1972, 1974, 1987, Sigurður Líndal 1974b 249-59

² IF I, 18, Kolsrud 1913a 196-98. An also gives the names of a further five who he said claimed to be bishops - see Magnus Mar Lárusson 1960a. In addition the Old German (11th century) poem *Merigarto* mentions the excellent, learned and honourable priest Reginpreht whom the author had met in Utrecht and who had been to Iceland and profited greatly from selling grain, wine and timber - Maurer ed 1964 71-72, see Maurer 1855-56 I, 599, Þorvaldur Thoroddsen 1892-1904 I, 58-59

³ Bysp I, 78

least one bishop in the country at a time, and two at least stayed for long periods. Hróðólfr (Rodulf) was in Borgarfjorður between 1030 and 1049, and is said to have left three monks at Bær (B) when he went to England to become abbot of Abingdon (d. 1052).¹ Bjarnharðr *saxlenski* (the Saxon) was in Iceland between 1048 and 1067. He lived in Vatnsdalur in the North and was praised for his blessings of churches and chimneys, bridges and wells, fords and lakes, cliffs and bells. He later became the first bishop of Selja in Norway.² Apart from Hróðólfr's monastic founding and Bjarnharðr's blessings, nothing is known of the activities of the missionary bishops. We do not know how many priests they had with them - if any -, if they preferred to bring experienced priests with them from abroad or if they put the emphasis on educating Icelanders to be priests. Neither have we any idea of their relations with the Icelandic chieftains, nor indeed the relations between the missionary bishops and Ísleifr after he became bishop in 1056.



What we do know is that at least some of the chieftains took an active interest in the church. Gizurr *hvíti* who, according to his grandson,³ was one of the protagonists of the conversion, took his son, Ísleifr, to Saxony and had him educated at the convent in Herford.⁴ According to Ari, Ísleifr was fifty when consecrated (1056)⁵ so he must have been born around 1006 and it is therefore reasonable to assume that he went to Saxony in the 1020s.⁶

¹ Bysp 1, 80, ÍF I, 65, *Chronicon monasterii de Abingdon* I, 463-64, Adam II, 57, 64, Anglo-Saxon Chronicle [1050], Joys 1948: 21-23

² Bysp 1, 80 - DI III, 21, 26, Adam IV, 34

³ Teitr Ísleifsson, quoted by Ari, ÍF I, 17

⁴ Bysp 1, 75, Sigurður Línðal 1974b: 255. This is not mentioned by Ari

⁵ ÍF I: 21

⁶ Cf. Kohne 1972: 13-14

This was a significant step. Here we have an Icelandic chieftain making a decisive career move on behalf of his son of a type until then unknown in Icelandic society. Ísleifr was Gizurr's son by his third wife, Þórdís daughter of Þóroddr *goði*, a neighbouring chieftain. We do not know enough about Gizurr's other children to appreciate Ísleifr's position regarding his chances of inheritance. Gizurr had had at least one child by each of his two earlier wives and *Hungrvaka* tells us that Gizurr and Þórdís had many children besides Ísleifr.¹ Of these children nothing is known and there is little to suggest that Ísleifr was a youngest son with slim chances of a career. After he returned from Saxony he acquired Skálholt as his estate, which must have been a reasonable property, although it is not entirely clear if it had been his father's main estate.² One source, *Ísleifs þáttur*, states that Ísleifr owned a *goðorð*, which can be assumed to have been inherited from his father.³ *Ísleifs þáttur* was probably composed in the 13th century⁴ and its author may simply have assumed that Ísleifr owned a *goðorð* as his father had no doubt owned one and as his descendants did as well, but then that is a very reasonable assumption. Ísleifr also achieved what seems to have been a respectable bride.⁵ All this rather points to Ísleifr being his father's intended successor as chieftain.⁶

Although we cannot know what was in Gizurr *hvíti's* mind when he decided to take his son to a Saxon convent, we can assume that something more was on his mind than just making a career for a young son. If he had only been interested in making Ísleifr a priest, it would have sufficed to place him in the hands of one of the missionary bishops.⁷ By going to the considerable trouble and expense of giving his son a proper education abroad, Gizurr was not only staking his bet on the church, but he gave himself and his son a clear advantage over both foreign missionaries and other Icelandic chieftains who may have let it suffice to have their sons educated by these missionaries

¹ Bysp 1, 75

² *Hungrvaka* says that Teitr, Gizurr *hvíti's* father, first built a farm at Skálholt, but then it must be remembered that the author of that work had set out to glorify the bishops of Skálholt and the see itself Bysp 1, 75. *Kristnu saga* has Gizurr *hvíti* living at Hofði, a farm adjacent to Skálholt before he moved it to Skálholt and Hofði is also mentioned as Gizurr's farm in *Landnámabók* (both H and S versions) - ASB XI, 45, ÍF I, 378. *Njals saga* has Gizurr living at Mosfell, his grandfather's original settlement - ÍF XII, 119

³ Bysp 1, 22

⁴ The *þáttur* is preserved in the compilation *Flateyjarbók* made in 1387-94 as an interpolation in *Ólafs saga helga*, and as an independent piece in a defective 15th century manuscript (AM 75e fol) - Bysp 1, 15-16. Koppenberg 1980 argues that *Ísleifs þáttur* is earlier than the first Icelandic revision of *Jóns saga helga*

⁵ Dalla was St Ólaf's second cousin once removed according to some sources - ÍF I, 216, 230, Bysp 1, 8, 11, 22-23, 75, ASB XI, 45. Also Ragnar Ólafsson 1969

⁶ An mentions none of this, i.e. neither Ísleifr's farmstead - although he says he was buried there - nor his owning a *goðorð* nor his bride, but then that is not the kind of information he gives and there is nothing to refute the later sources

⁷ As we do not know exactly when Ísleifr was in Herford it is possible that no missionary bishops were available at the time of Gizurr's decision, i.e. it is quite possible that Ísleifr was younger than fourteen when taken to Saxony. But whether or not any missionary bishops had arrived before Ísleifr's departure, Gizurr's decision remains significant.

or not bothered at all. With his foreign education Ísleifr could claim to be just as good a churchman as the foreign missionaries and he had the advantage over them in family connections and an economic base to work from.

As far as we can gather Ísleifr must have preached at his church in Skálholt from his arrival in Iceland, and it is significant to note that the two missionary bishops whose places of residence are known and seem to have been the most active, chose different regions of the country to work in.¹ Settlement patterns and population distribution are largely unknown for the 11th century, but the geography speaks for itself – the southern plain, in which Skálholt is centrally placed, is the single largest area of continuous habitable land in the country and if all its habitable land had been occupied by the 11th century, that population represented the largest group of people in the country who were accessible without having to cross mountains or deserts. It would be natural to expect strategically minded missionaries to have chosen this region to work in, as they did not as far as can be seen, it is tempting to assume that Ísleifr, with his powerful family connections around much of the plain, had already established himself there and meant serious business as a churchman.

How, or if, Ísleifr was elected bishop is obscure. Arn is completely silent on the issue and the later sources only say that he was chosen by the men of the country, which is what one would expect the authors to have believed; even if they had a genuine source for it, the meaning of this is difficult to assess.² His journey to the mainland, probably begun in 1053 or 1054, seems to have been well organised and planned. He first went to the court of the Emperor Henry III, and presented him with a polar bear and received a letter of safe conduct in return. Thence he went to Rome where he was detained some time and got a letter from the pope ordering Archbishop Adalbert of Bremen to consecrate him. He stayed with Adalbert for a while and after his consecration he spent one winter in Norway before returning home in 1057.³ Bringing polar bears from Greenland to Germany is not a feat one would expect of penniless

¹ *Hungrvaka* says Bishop Kolr was buried at Skálholt (Bysp 1, 78) which suggests that he was active in the south but when he was there is not certain. Arn says he was only a few years in the country and mentions him between Bjarnharðr *bokvísi* whom St Ólafr sent to Iceland, probably somewhere around 1020 and Hróðolfr who came to Iceland in 1030. If Bjorn Jonsson's comment in his *Skarðsarbók* is to be taken seriously, that Kolr stayed with Hallr Þorarinsson in Haukadalur (Á), it must have been after 1025. *Skarðsarbók*, 195, ÍF I, 18, 21. Taken together, this rather patchy evidence suggests that he must have died around 1030, when Ísleifr was either still in Saxony or just newly arrived in Iceland. Both Bjorn Þorsteinsson (1953: 187, Bjorn Þorsteinsson & Bergsteinn Jonsson 1991: 57) and Jón Johannesson (1956: 16) think Kolr was, like Bjarnharðr, sent by St Ólafr. The author of *Víga-Glúms saga* on the other hand makes Kolr confirm Víga-Glúmr on his deathbed, which according to the saga's chronology was in 1002-3. *JF IX*, 97-98, Turville-Petre 1960: 14vi-14viii.

² ASB XI, 45-46, Bysp 1, 23-76, Bsk I, 152 (also 216), which is reminiscent of Adam of Bremen 'On their [the Icelanders] petition, therefore, the archbishop consecrated a certain most holy man named Ísleifr' - Adam IV, 36. Magnus Mar Larusson 1967c: 52-55 interprets these sources as evidence for the early bishops being democratically elected, or somehow selected by the general public, but there are no grounds for that kind of understanding. Cf. Joys 1948: 70-71. On episcopal selection in Iceland see further in ch. III.4.1.

³ Mostly according to *Hungrvaka*, Bysp 1, 76-77. Also ÍF I, 21 and Adam IV, 36.

country-priests, but again the significance of this is difficult to assess,¹ because we cannot know whether Ísleifr planned and financed his trip himself or if he was only the protégé of more powerful chieftains, or anything between these two alternatives. It does however suggest indigenous interest and investment in Christianity; that is in accordance with the view that from an early stage the shaping of the Icelandic church was in the hands of the Icelandic aristocracy, and that the influence of foreign missionaries was slight. The Archbishop in Bremen clearly had the power to consecrate bishops in his diocese without asking the pope so it was probably not his idea that Ísleifr travelled all the way to Rome.

II 3. Early evidence of priests

Late summer in the year 1000 must have been a very busy time for one Þormóðr, a priest whom Gizurr *hvíti* and Hjalti Skeggjason are supposed to have brought with them from Norway to the Alþing of that summer.² As far as our sources can tell us he was the only priest in the country at the time and he was faced with the task of baptising the whole population in compliance with the decision to convert taken at the Alþing.³

We can only speculate on how Þormóðr fared, how and when the whole nation was baptised or in what form Christian services were given.⁴ The task must have been enormous and it must have taken a long time to establish any kind of basic Christian practices. An important problem was that of manpower. Not only was there the technical difficulty of persuading priests to make the perilous journey across the sea to an isolated and little known country, but also the political difficulty that royal support for Christianity in the North Atlantic had receded with the fall of King Ólafr Tryggvason in September 1000 and was not continued until King Ólafr Haraldsson, the saint, took power after 1015. In the meantime Norway had rulers who were at best

¹ Also because of the possibility that this is a literary motif, there are some frightening parallels between this account and the episode *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* which is preserved in *Morkunskinna*. *Auðunar þáttur* tells of one Auðun, a man of inconsiderable means and humble family, who takes it into his head to present a polar bear to King Sveinn Úlfsson of Denmark (1047-74), and having accomplished that after considerable tribulations, receives a travel grant from Sveinn and goes to Rome - Mork, 180-87; ÍBS II, 35-36

² ÍFI, 15; ASB XI, 38, IF XXVI, 347. This Þormóðr was possibly the same as one of the priests brought by King Ólafr Tryggvason from England to Norway some years previously, cf. Thermo in Theodoricus Monachus - MHN, 21

³ *Kristni saga* mentions 7 robed men with two crosses at the Lögberg when Gizurr and Hjalti delivered their message of conversion - ASB XI, 38. It is not entirely certain what is meant, although *skróddur* usually refers to the clothing of a cleric (from *skróði* = vestments). This story seems to be a part of a folktale about standing crosses at Skarð in Land, one signifying the height of King Ólafr and the other the height of Hjalti Skeggjason - ASB XI, 38

⁴ *Kristni saga*'s account of the baptism of the men of the different quarters immediately after the Alþing does not have to be taken seriously, ASB XI, 42, ÓST II, 198, and in any case it only accounts for those who had attended the assembly

indifferent to Christianity and often hostile to it, and this can hardly have encouraged English or German priests or bishops to go and save souls in Norway, let alone Iceland.¹ The issue of recruitment is a very important one, not only in the traditional sense of the cultural origins of influence, but even more so in the sense of numbers of priests active in the country in the first decades of Christianity and the scope of the missionary activity

As related above, missionary bishops did make their way to Iceland, but none are known until the 1020s and of them little is known but the names. We would give much to have an idea of the conditions these missionaries worked in; were the Icelanders heathen at heart long after the conversion, so that the missionaries had to concentrate on teaching the basics to the populace? Or were the Icelanders already well acquainted with Christianity, in which case the missionaries' efforts can have been directed towards consolidating the position of the church in society? In other words, was it difficult to convince people that they had to attend mass regularly and observe all kinds of rules and rites, and was it an uphill struggle to make chieftains and/or other men of means spend their wealth on building and endowing churches and paying priests or having their sons ordained? Or were people quite happy to attend churches and chieftains more than ready to invest in churches and priests? In the latter case the job of the missionaries will have been more to organise and bring practices into line, overseeing that things were done correctly rather than trying to see to it that they were done at all.

We have no way of knowing which of these extremes is more true. Only 5 churches can with reasonable certainty be said to have been built in Iceland before 1100 (see ch. III 3.1, also II 4 1) and only 9 Icelandic priests - who can be regarded as historical personages - are mentioned as being active before that date (see ch. II 3 1) We cannot even read much into these small numbers because of the patchy nature of the sources. The handful of facts concerning the development of the church in the 11th century have all come down to us in isolation from any accompanying evidence which might have allowed us to judge their relevance. All these scraps of evidence can be made to fit either of the scenarios sketched above.

Lundnáma's tale of Hróðólfr's monastery at Bær (B), for instance, can be taken as an argument for both models.² On the one hand Hróðólfr may be seen to have been copying the practices of many of his more famous predecessors in the missionary profession, founding a monastery in the midst of a heathen population, as a base for further missionary activity. On the other hand it may well be argued that a monastery could hardly have been founded unless there was economic, and therefore spiritual,

¹ Kolsrud 1958: 134-35

² 'But when Bishop Hróðólfr left Bær, where he had lived, he left behind him three monks. One of them had a dream.' [En er Hróðólfr byskup for brott ór Bæ, þar er hann hafði buit, þá varu þar eptir munkar þrír. Einn þeirra dreymdi.] - only in the *Hauksbók* version - IFI, 65

support for it. This could be debated indefinitely, but it would be fruitless because the cynical view can easily be taken that the story in Haukr Erlendsson's version of *Landnámabók* has no basis in reality. Haukr was writing in the first decade of the 14th century¹, which is in itself reason enough not to take his story seriously; the tale is also found in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta*, but there no mention is made of Hróðólfr or the monks,² which makes Haukr's addition of them suspicious.

This is only an example of the problems we run into whenever we try to extract usable information from the few scraps of evidence left to us, it usually ends with us having to admit that we can say very little with any degree of certainty. Even Ari's account, which is on the whole credible, is so laconic that we are left totally to our own devices in giving meaning to the few scraps of evidence he does supply.

One of the events Ari relates, which is undoubtedly a significant one, is the consecration of Ísleifr Gizurarson in 1056. While the importance of this event for later developments is unquestionable, its relevance for our understanding of Icelandic society and the place of the church within it at that time is far from clear. It is useful to remember that Ísleifr was consecrated as missionary bishop,³ and in that sense his position was little different from that of the other missionary bishops active in the country at his time. The only difference was that his mission was specifically to Iceland⁴ and that he was an Icelander himself. The question is: do we see in this a stage in the development of the native Icelandic church, which had by 1050 become strong enough and sufficiently integrated with the native power structure to have the need for, and means to produce, an Icelandic head of an Icelandic church. Or do we see in this the actions of a perceptive individual in a still half-heathen and only nominally Christian society, who saw the church as a vehicle of power and took it upon himself to bring Christianity upon his unsuspecting countrymen, much in the same way as the two Ólafrs decided to do for the Norwegians?

On the basis of *Íslendingabók* and the few other available sources, we simply cannot discern which of these two options could be closer to reality. But we can speculate on the likeliest type of development and try to construct hypotheses which are credible in themselves and best explain both the few pieces of evidence known from the earlier times and the later situation that can be described from fuller source material. There are two principal types of evidence to consider in this context; on the one hand there is the evidence of churches, their numbers and locations and on the other the evidence of the priests who appear in the sources, their numbers and stations in life. The churches will be dealt with in the next chapter, but let us here first look at the

¹ Stefán Karlsson 1964

² ÓST I, 278-79

³ It was only during the episcopacy of his son Gizurr that an episcopal see was established as Gizurr had a law passed to that effect and gave Skálholt to the see - ÍF I, 23

⁴ Bsk I, 151 (216), Bysp 1, 77

handful of 11th century priests and what can be inferred from the little surviving information about them, and then at the early 12th century evidence and what can be inferred from that.

II 3.1 *Some 11th century priests*

Eyrbyggja saga mentions four early churches, two of them built by Snorri goði, the central figure of that saga.¹ This unusually high number is in accordance with the author's antiquarian interests evident by his various tales and anecdotes about pagan rituals and other lore about the faded past. In the light of his historical interests it is tempting to suggest that the author was not wholly comfortable with his statement about the churches built soon after the conversion by three chieftains, because he felt he had to explain. 'but priests did not hold services at the churches that were built because there were few priests in Iceland in that time'² The author either knew or realised that there could have been very few priests in Iceland in the first years after the conversion, but he still had to make his chieftains church-builders or accommodate traditions to that effect, and therefore tried to make the reader believe that churches were built with little prospect of services being given. He also explains why the chieftains should have gone to the trouble 'And it encouraged men to build churches, that preachers promised that a man would dispose of places in heaven for as many men as could stand in the church he would build'³ A theology implying on the one hand that one's place in heaven was up to one's chieftain and on the other that building a church and standing in it was a satisfactory Christian observance. This may very well have been a ploy of desperate and hard pressed missionaries hoping that this form of monumentalism would appeal to the possibly eager but definitely ignorant flock.⁴

It is almost comic to imagine the newly converted congregation, more or less ignorant of Christian practices, standing on the church floor, awed by a splendid building but slightly puzzled about what to do in it. It is of course unlikely that there

¹ ÍF IV, 136-183. A related account is also found in Jon Ólafsson's retelling of *Heiðarvíga saga* - ÍF III, 230.

² [en prestar urðu eigi til at veita tíðir at kirkjum, þótt gorvar væri, því at þeir váru fáir á Íslandi í þann tíma] - ÍF IV, 136.

³ [ok hvatt menn þat mjök til kirkjugörðar, at þat var fyrheit kennimanna, at maðr skyldi jafnmörgum mönnum eiga heimilt rúm í himnaríki, sem standa mætti í kirkju þeirri, er hann létu gera] - ÍF IV, 136. The same idea occurs in *Heiðarvíga saga* - ÍF III, 230, unfortunately in the part which Jón Ólafsson wrote from memory after the manuscript burned in the fire of Copenhagen in 1728, and Jon may have been unconsciously affected by the account in *Eyrbyggja saga*, although the sagas overlap to a considerable extent and one can easily have been a source for the other on matters like these. It strengthens the case that *Heiðarvíga saga* had accounts of early church building, that it adds that one of the three early churches - the one built by Víga-Styr at Berserkjahraun, was later burnt and that Víga-Styr's bones were reburned at Helgafell - ÍF III, 235.

⁴ Cf. Gren 1989 who stresses the monumental aspect of stone-church building by aristocrats in 12th century Scandinavia.

were many churches when there were still few priests, particularly churches which were intended for large gatherings. The other possibility, that as soon as the majority of the population was at least nominally Christian, church structures of some sort were built to accommodate funeral services and possibly the occasional mass by an itinerant priest, will be argued for in ch. II 4.2. What is certain is that there is no reliable evidence for Icelandic priests giving regular services at a church until after the middle of the 11th century.

The first Icelander to be associated with clerical vows was one Guðlaugr, fourth son of Snorri *goði* and Ásdís Víga-Styrsdóttir. They were married in 983 according to the chronology of *Eyrbyggja saga*,¹ making a likely birth date for Guðlaugr around 990. According to *Ævi Snorra goða* Guðlaugr was a monk,² and that is as good a source as can be asked for, with a likely 12th or early 13th century date (see ch. II 4.1). In the part of *Heiðarvíga saga* only preserved through Jón Ólafsson's retelling of the manuscript that burned in the fire of Copenhagen in 1728,³ there is an account of how one morning the good mannered and devout but mostly idle Guðlaugr met his father in the doorway of the church in Sælingsdalstunga (SD) (presumably in 1008) and preferred not to accompany his father and brothers to avenge their grandfather, Víga-Styrr. Snorri said he had not asked him to work hitherto, that he should occupy himself as he pleased thereafter, and that it pleased him if Guðlaugr did not accompany them and cultivated his virtues instead. The sun was shining in Guðlaugr's face and his father was later reported to have said that he had never seen a face like Guðlaugr's that morning, red as blood, so that Snorri almost took fright. According to Jón Ólafsson, Guðlaugr went to England a few years later with his father's support and joined a monastery, lived a pious life and was considered an excellent cleric to his dying day.⁴

This story is of course mainly about Snorri's magnanimity and support for Christianity; he appreciated the value of Guðlaugr's devotion and we are possibly to understand that Guðlaugr's prayers were equally important to the family's cause as his brothers' resolve to take revenge on their grandfather's slayer. Guðlaugr's red face may be a sign of holiness, although it may also be interpreted as signifying that Guðlaugr was just as upset about his un-avenged grandfather as his father and brothers. These are of course 13th century sentiments,⁵ but the tradition that Guðlaugr was a monk may well have been based on fact, it is at any rate entirely plausible that in the first decades after the conversion there were individuals who took more to Christianity than others

¹ ÍF IV 75

² ÍF IV, 185

³ On Jón Ólafsson's memory see ÍF III, cxii-cxvi

⁴ ÍF III, 246-47

⁵ *Heiðarvíga saga* is normally considered to be among the earliest of the Sagas of Icelanders, if not the earliest, and written around 1200, but recently it has been suggested that it post-dates *Laxdæla saga* and therefore has a late 13th century date - ÍF III cxxxiv-cxlv, ÍBS II, 113

and had to go abroad to follow their vocation. It is furthermore likely that Christian teaching first influenced households of powerful chieftains like Snorri *goði*, who were active supporters of Christianity. But if Guðlaugr in reality went to England to become a monk in the 1010s, that indicates that even if Christianity had powerful supporters, ecclesiastical institutions had not yet developed in Iceland.

Later in the same chapter of *Heiðarvíga saga*, which also survives only in Jón Ólafsson's retelling, when Snorri and his sons had gone to Bær (B) and killed one Þorsteinn Gíslason and his son in revenge for Víga-Styrr, their corpses were found outside the farmstead by Þorsteinn's wife as she came back from the shieling. The wife hurried to the next farmstead, presumably Varmilækur, and found there a relative of hers, a cleric called Eldjárn. He responds quickly and gathers men to go and look at the corpses and send messages to the neighbouring farmsteads.¹

Of this cleric nothing more is known, and the lack of genealogical information about him in the saga suggests that either its author, or Jón Ólafsson, thought it fitting that a cleric should be called upon in circumstances such as these, and therefore made him up, rather than this represents a genuine tradition about an early 11th century Icelandic priest.

Similar literary reasons must account for Snorri Sturluson's account of one Bárðr or Brandr, whom we meet as a young priest from Vestfirðir, on a ship owned by the Icelander Steinn Skaptason in Norway ca. 1025. In this episode Steinn is the hero; he had become irritated with King Ólafr and killed one of his men. He then fled to where his ship was moored, off the island of Gízka, which also was the home of a powerful chieftain. The chieftain was not at home, but his wife was about to give birth, and it looked as if the birth would be difficult. With that in mind people saw that a priest might be needed, but there was no priest on the island or in the vicinity. The chieftain's men at last came to Steinn's ship and asked Bárðr the priest to come with them. It is explained that he was lacking in education and he declined on account of his ignorance. Steinn then stepped in and asked Bárðr to go nevertheless, and the priest agreed on condition that Steinn came with him. The pair of them then went to the woman's chambers where she soon afterwards bore a sickly girl. Bárðr baptised her with Steinn acting as godfather, and he gave the infant a ring. The chieftain's wife was now in Steinn's debt, and with her help he eventually managed to escape King Ólafr's wrath.² In this episode the priest has no other function than being the means through which Steinn could gain access to the bedside of an influential wife in order to save his skin. As with Eldjárn in *Heiðarvíga saga*, the lack of genealogical information and the usefulness of a cleric in the story-line, make Bárðr an unlikely candidate for the status of a historical personage.

¹ ÍF III, 250

² ÍF XXVII, 244-45

There are two other priests who according to *Grettis saga* had pastoral responsibilities in the 1020s. With them we enter firmly into the realm of folklore; both the nameless priest in Forsæludalur (H) and Steinn priest at Eyjardalsá in Bárðardalur (Þ),¹ are clearly folkloric creations and are as such probably not even intended to be historically significant (see also ch. II 4.1 on the churches in *Grettis saga*).

Bishop Ísleifr Gizurarson (b. ca. 1005, d. 1080) is the first Icelander known to have been ordained as priest and have had pastoral responsibilities in Iceland, and there is very little evidence of others of his generation doing the same. It is commonly stated that Sigfúss Loðmundarson, the father of Sæmundr *fróði*, was a priest, but this is based on a scribal error in the *Hauksbók* version of *Landnámabók*. Sæmundr was well known as a priest but in one case where his ancestry is related it is not he but his father who is called a priest,² suggesting that the scribe got mixed up. If it was intentional, this early 14th century tradition is not supported by any other evidence.

According to *Ljósvetninga saga* there was in Eyjafjörður in the episcopacy of Ísleifr (1056-80) a priest called Ketill *Möðruvellingaprestr*. Ketill supervised an ordeal which took place in Laufás (E). A woman had become pregnant and claimed that the father was a man who was then abroad. The man's *fóstbróðir* and legal representative, a certain Þorkell of the Ljósvetningar, contested the woman's claim, arguing that she had slept with too many men for it to be possible to decide who was the father. The chieftain Eyjólfur *halti* Guðmundsson of the Möðruvellingar, who had taken on the case on behalf of the woman's father, offered that she would undergo an ordeal if he pledged to pay the (child's) *réttr*³ and guaranteed paternity (the legal responsibilities of fatherhood) should she emerge clean. Þorkell refused to guarantee paternity, a precautionary measure as he might be liable to honour his pledge even if she emerged scathed, but agreed to the ordeal and pledged the *réttr* and its final due date to the priest who supervised the ordeal. This was accepted and the woman began her fast. When her bandages were removed, Ketill the priest did not give the verdict immediately and Þorkell then asked him why he was worse than his father (*verrfeðrungr*) and did not declare the woman scathed, and promptly named witnesses to his words. The priest replied: 'It's out of order for you two to pronounce the judgement and take the case out of my hands; the decision is mine to make. We shall make a second, clearer trial of the matter.'⁴ This apparently was not heeded and the quarrel developed into a serious dispute.

¹ IF VII, 112 (cf 110), 209

² IF I, 363

³ A fixed fine of 48 ounce units, payable in fornication cases like these, as well as for libel, killing, wounding and treachery. The fine is expressed as a person's 'right' and was the same for everyone except vagabonds. In cases of fornication the fine would be paid to the child - Grg III, 661-62, Andersson & Miller 1989: 208 fns. 147, 148, 149

⁴ Trans. Andersson & Miller 1989: 209 [Nú fer óhildlega er þið dæmið og takið málið fyrir hendur mer fram er ek á atkvæði at veita ok skal vera enn tilraun onnur skírari] - IF X, 69

This story of the ordeal is suspicious, because of the priest's demand for a retrial. The law codes do not explain what to do if a verdict in an ordeal was interfered with, or how ordeals could be declared mistrials. There is however a clause, which seems to be an amendment, allowing the bishops to repeat ordeals in paternity cases and heed the verdict from the later ordeal.¹ This indicates that by 1200 ordeals, in paternity cases at least, were considered to be under the church's supervision and that the bishops had the privilege to have them repeated. The church's prerogative in sexual matters can hardly have been established until the late 12th century (see ch. III 4.2). This therefore suggests that this account in *Ljósvetninga saga* is coloured by 13th century legal practices, and that as priests normally supervised ordeals then, the author had to invent a priest to supervise his 11th century ordeal. The fact that the priest is given a name and a nickname indicates however that the author had some historical personage in mind. The nickname *Mǫðruvellingsprestr* (the priest of the men of Moðruvellir) suggests a connection with Moðruvellir in Eyjafjörður (E) or Moðruvellir in Horgárdalur (E). It may either mean that he was a priest who had served the church at either place, or that he was of the Mǫðruvellingar kindred from Moðruvellir in Eyjafjörður. Plot-wise that is however unlikely as that Moðruvellir was the seat of Eyjólfur *halti*, and Þorkell is unlikely to have accepted someone to supervise the ordeal who was not completely neutral. As the ordeal took place in Laufás it seems likely that the author intended the priest to be from there, a neutral man on neutral ground. There were important churches on all three farms in the 13th century so that does not help us. Þorkell's insinuation that Ketill was a lesser man than his father is strange as the father's identity is not given, but it implies that the father was of some standing. If Ketill was of good family and had connections with Moðruvellir, the saga's audience will have connected him with the Mǫðruvellingar kindred and its more famous representative, also called Ketill, who was bishop of Hólar 1122-45. It is possible that Ketill *Mǫðruvellingsprestr* and Ketill the bishop were originally the same person, and that the priest and chieftain at Moðruvellir had got so completely divorced from the bishop in popular legend, that it became possible to move the former 50 years or so back in time. Alternatively Ketill *Mǫðruvellingsprestr* may have been the invention of the author of *Ljósvetninga saga*, and in both cases the author would then have intended the names to be meaningful to his audience, suggesting that the priest was on the Mǫðruvellingar side. That would add meaning to the passage, Ketill hesitated in giving his verdict, because the hand was indeed scathed, and right was on the side of the Ljósvetningar as usual. That would however make Þorkell look somewhat simple: he had no reason to place his trust in someone called Ketill *Mǫðruvellingsprestr*.²

¹ Gíg 1b 216. On ordeals see Maurer 1874b, Magnus Mar Larsson 1960h, Pall Sigurdsson 1971 252-57 277-82, Miller 1988b

² On this case see Andersson & Miller 1989 32-37

Whatever the identity of Ketill *Möðruvellingsprest* there are no grounds for placing much faith in the historicity of this account, and it cannot be used to shed light on the role of priests in the 11th century or their relationship with powerful laymen.¹

According to the *Konungsbók* version of *Bandamanna saga*, composed in the late 13th or early 14th century,² there was in the middle of the 11th century a priest in Reykholt (B) called Þórðr Sölvason. The chieftain Hermundr Illugason at Gilsbakki (B) who is one of the bad characters in the saga became sick on his way to do some mischief and had to be taken back to Gilsbakki with all kinds of eerie portents happening on the way. At Gilsbakki he was put in bed and Þórðr the priest was sent for. When he came Hermundr could not speak so Þórðr prepared to leave but was called in again but Hermundr could still not speak. Þórðr left again but was sent for the third time, and this time Hermundr managed to utter the words 'five in the gully, five in the gully' and then died.³ What Hermundr was referring to is obscure, it may have something to do with what he considered to have lost out on in his and his allies' vain attempt to confiscate the property of the chieftain Oddr Ófeigsson.

This story is in both principal manuscripts of the saga, but the *Möðruvallabók* version does not give the priest a name and has him living at Síðumúli (B).⁴ This story has all the characteristics of a well moulded folk tale of an unexpected but just and apparently painful death, with portents, success in the third attempt, and an obscure uttering. It is uncharacteristic for the saga, which is considered among those that are primarily literary creations. The saga's author was well versed in the laws of *Grágás*, and had sound knowledge of the principal chieftains of the mid 11th century. There is no particular reason why the name of the priest is included in the *Konungsbók* version, an anonymous one would have done perfectly well as it does in *Möðruvallabók*, except of course that it adds a flavour of authenticity. Þórðr was a real person who is mentioned widely in genealogies.⁵ He was the forefather of the Reykhyllingar; his son was Magnús in Reykholt who is mentioned among the chieftains who were ordained as priests in Gizurr Ísleifsson's episcopacy (1082-1118).⁶ The Reykhyllingar owned a *godord* and so did their neighbours the Gilsbekkingar whose ancestor Hermundr was. It is plausible that the story about Hermundr's strange death was preserved among the Reykhyllingar, who are likely to have enjoyed telling stories at the Gilsbekkingar's

¹ Bairði Guðmundsson 1953: 46-52 has suggested that the story of the ordeal is based on an almost identical case which took place in the 1150s (Sturl, 60-62). There however it was the bishop who supervised the ordeal

² IBS II, 121-22

³ ÍF VII, 361 cf. lxxxv. The manuscript is believed to be from the mid 15th century - ONPR, 31

⁴ *Möðruvallabók* is earlier than *Konungsbók* but most commentators are of the opinion that the *Konungsbók* text of *Bandamanna saga* is more original - ÍF VII, xciv-xcvi. Hallvard Magerøy (ed. 1981: xlviii-lviii) however interprets this and other differences between the manuscripts as evidence of additions made to the original text made by the scribe of *Konungsbók*, or some of its exemplars.

⁵ ÍF I, 78, 79, 157; ÍF XIII, 28, Sturl, 5, 92

⁶ ASB XI, 50

expense, although outright hostilities are not recorded between them.¹ The difference between the two versions of the story of Hermundr's death may lie in the different origin of the manuscripts, *Móðruvallabók* is believed to have been written in Eyjafjörður, whereas *Konungsbók* seems to originate in the West.² If the story originates among the Reykhyllingar, it is likely that Þórðr Sǫlvason being a priest was based on family tradition. It is of course equally possible that just as he made use of other historical figures the author of *Bandamanna saga* made Þórðr a priest because all his more famous descendants were priests. It is testimony to the author's historical awareness that in this story it is implied that there was no priest at Gilsbakki by the middle of the 11th century - there certainly was one there, if not two, in the author's time³ - and as it is unlikely that he knew that for sure, he must have held similar views on early church organisation as the author of *Eyrbyggja saga*, assuming that there were churches but very few priests.

While there are few grounds to place much faith in this type of source, it is perfectly possible that Þórðr was a priest. If saga traditions can be trusted the Gilsbekkingar were the dominant family in this area in the 10th and early 11th centuries, but by the 12th the Reykhyllingar had risen to prominence. Þórðr's son Magnús is the first of that family on record as a chieftain, and while we do not of course know how he came to that position, the temptation is to explain it in similar terms as the rise of the Haukdælir; that sometime in the early or mid 11th century the Reykhyllingar recognised the political advantages of holding church office, and managed through that to consolidate their position to the extent that by 1100 they had become equal to or even more prominent than the Gilsbekkingar⁴

The evidence for priests of Bishop Ísleifr's generation is therefore meagre to say the least, there is only Þórðr Sǫlvason who can be tentatively regarded as having been a priest. The presence of foreign missionary bishops in Iceland into the 1060s suggests that down to that time native clergymen were thin on the ground, or more precisely that it was only in Ísleifr's episcopacy that an indigenous priesthood, of the type we know from later sources, emerged. For the second generation there is slightly better evidence than for the first; there are seven candidates of which six did almost certainly exist.

Of Bishop Ísleifr's three sons two were priests; Gizurr (b. 1042 d. 1118) who succeeded him as bishop of Skálholt in 1082 and Teitr (d. 1111) in Haukadalur (Á) who fostered and taught Ari *fróði* (b. 1067 d. 1148), Bishop Þorlákr Rúnólfsson (b. 1085 d.

¹ In fact the chieftain Hermundr Kóðransson in Kalmannstunga (B) (d. 1197), Hermundr Illugason's great-grandson, supported Pall Sǫlvason in his dispute with Bǫðvarr Þorðarson and Sturla Þorðarson - Sturl, 93 et 92

² IF VII, xciii

³ DI XII, 10, DI IV, 121-23

⁴ *Kristni saga* lists Magnús Þorðarson among the chieftains who were ordained in Bishop Gizurr's time, but Stymir Hreinsson of the Gilsbekkingar among the greatest chieftains in Iceland at the death of Bishop Gizurr - ASB XI, 50, 53

1133) and Bishop Björn Gilsson (d. 1162).¹ As far as we know neither Gizurr nor Teitr were taught by their father; Gizurr studied in Saxony and Teitr was fostered by Hallr Þórarinnsson *mildi* in Haukadalur (Á).² All three sons of Bishop Ísleifr are called chieftains (*hǫfðingjar*),³ but it was only Teitr's descendants who owned *goðorð* later on. The only thing that is known about Þorvaldr is that he lived at Hraungerði (Á), and *Hungrvaka* calls him a 'great chieftain' which may indicate his seniority. With Gizurr at Skálholt and Teitr at Haukadalur the three are likely to have exercised control over much, if not all, of Árnesþing and their secure regional position is reflected in their marriages. Both Gizurr and Teitr married women from different corners of the country; Gizurr's wife was Steinunn Þorgrímsdóttir from Borgarhofn (A).⁴ She was a widow of Þórir Skegg-Broddason from Hof in Vopnafjörður (A),⁵ with whom the chieftain family of the Hofverjar came to an end,⁶ and from a political point of view it was to that inheritance Gizurr was marrying. Teitr was married to Jórunn Einarsdóttir, probably from Óxnadalur (E) on her father's side, but a great-granddaughter of Síðu-Hallr on her mother's side.⁷ Both Teitr and Gizurr married off their daughters to powerful chieftains in the North; Gróa Gizurardóttir was married to Ketill Þorsteinsson from Móðruvellir (E), later bishop of Hólar and Rannveig Teitsdóttir was married to the chieftain Hafliði Mátsson.

These alliances are a testimony to the high societal status of these men, and to their importance in national politics. They were clearly on a level with the most powerful secular chieftains in the country, but they were also dedicated to the church and its advancement. However inflated Bishop Gizurr's achievements may have become in later sources, it is beyond doubt that he donated his ancestral lands to the see of Skálholt, thereby putting the bishopric on a sound financial footing, and that he at least supported the introduction of the tithe and the establishment of the second see at Hólar. Teitr's contribution is apparent in his rather splendid disciples. Whether the Haukdælir came to wield political power because of its involvement with the church, or if ecclesiastical office just added to their prominence, and whether they considered ecclesiastical office primarily as a means to increase their worldly influence or if their

¹ ÍF I, 20, Bsk I, 153

² Sturl, 192.

³ [Ísleifr átti þrjá sonu, þeir urðu allir hǫfðingjar nýtir] *Íslendingabók* - ÍF I, 20, [Ísleifr biskup átti þrjá syni, ok urðu allir hǫfðingjar miklir] *Jóns saga helga* - Bsk I, 153, 219, [Ísleifur biskup átti þrjá syni, þeir voru allir hǫfðingjar,] *Haukdæla þáttir* - Sturl, 192, [uoru allir *gǫfgir menn (*þiðmenne)] *Þáttir af Ísleifi* - Bysp I, 23, [Gizurr hét son þeira, er síðan var byskup, annarr var Teitr, er síðan bjó í Haukadal; þriðri hét Þorvaldr, er bjó í Hraungerði, mikill hǫfðingi] *Hungrvaka* - Bysp I, 75-76

⁴ ÍF I, 310.

⁵ ÍF I, 291, 292

⁶ Þórir's and Steinunn's son Broddi is said to have become impoverished and moved to live with his half sister Gróa Gizurardóttir, wife of Bishop Ketill Þorsteinsson at Hólar - ÍF XI, 350

⁷ ÍF I, 259 fn 5, 318

drive was principally a spiritual one, it seems certain that Gizurr and Teitr considered their fortunes to be closely linked with the advancement of the church as an institution.

The same can be argued for the other priests of their generation, and Ari *fróði* attributes this to the example of Ísleifr:

But when chieftains and other good men saw that Ísleifr was much more competent than other clergymen available in that country, many of them gave him their sons to be taught and had them ordained as priests. Two of them were later consecrated as bishops, Kollr who was east in the Vík [in Norway], and Jon at Hólar.¹

According to *Landnámabók* Kollr Þorkelsson *Vikverjabiskup* was the great-grandson of Ketilbjörn Teitsson in a direct male line and therefore Bishop Ísleifr's first cousin twice removed. Kollr's career in Norway is not mentioned in sources independent of *Íslendingabók*, and the status of his family is obscure. It seems certain that by the time Kollr was studying at Skálholt Ketilbjörn's line had been sidelined by their cousins of Gizurr *hvíti's* line. Kollr may therefore be the first example of someone of aristocratic birth taking holy orders not to enhance his secular power but to save himself from obscurity by making a career for himself within the church. The fact that Kollr made his career in Norway indicates that his cousins had ensured that there were no ancestral lands or powers for him in Árnesþing.

As discussed in ch. III 4.1 St Jón's career shows similar symptoms. He did however spend more than 20 years as a priest, and probably chieftain, at Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (R), and it may be that his becoming bishop of Hólar in 1106 was due to his failure either in establishing his power in Rangárþing or because he did not have any heirs to hand it to.

When it had been agreed to create a second diocese in the northern quarter there was according to *Jóns saga helga* prolonged bickering among the chieftains of that quarter about which of them should concede his patrimony for the establishment of the see. In the end a respectable priest, one Illugi Bjarnarson, relinquished his land at Hólar in Hjaltadalur (Sk), for which, *Jóns saga helga* assures us, God gave him a beautiful placement in everlasting bliss which is rightly understood as the patrimony of good men.² Hafliði Másson at Breiðabólstaður in Vesturhóp (H) had among his daughters one who was married to the priest Ingimundr son of Illugi and Arna daughter of Þorkell Gellisson.³ According to *Laurentius saga* Illugi of Hólar moved to Breiðabólstaður

¹ [En es þat sá hqðingjar ok góðir menn, at Ísleifr var miklu nyrri en aðrir kenimenn, þeir es þvísá landi næðri þa seldu honum margir sonu sína til læringar ok letu vígja til presta. Þeir urðu síðan vígðir tveir til byskupa, Kollr, es var í Vík austr, ok Jóan at Hólum.] - ÍF I, 20

² Bsk I, 159, 231-32. It does not seem that Hólar was Illugi's patrimony because according to *Jóns saga* one Ovi Hjaltason lived there earlier in the 11th century (Bsk I, 163, 235) who was no doubt the son of Hjalti Þórðarson who lived there in 1028 according to the chronology of *Gretis saga* (ÍF VII, 226) grandson of Hjalti Þórðarson the primary settler in Hjaltadalur - ÍF I, 238. Brynleifur Tóbiasson 1943: 17 cl. 62-63.

³ ASB XI, 55 where she is called Árný.

after giving up Hólar for the new see¹ and it is reasonable to assume that he is the same as Ingimundr's father.

It makes good sense that Hafliði was influential, if not instrumental, in the establishment of the new see.² and the suggested familial connections between him and Illugi of Hólar may go some way to explain why Illugi felt he could relinquish his land. If Illugi was a chieftain as his marriage with a daughter of Þorkell Gellisson would indicate he can well have secured the marriage of his son to Hafliði's daughter long before the question of the see arose and those affinities may then have eased his generosity. It is equally possible that Hafliði and Illugi made a deal whereby Illugi gave up his land for the see but secured a very advantageous marriage for his son and comfort at Breiðabólstaður in his old age.

In Illugi Bjarnarson we have the only example of an Icelandic 11th century priest outside the Southern quarter. The admittedly circumstantial evidence for his familial relations also suggests that like the first priests in the south he was of high status, but it seems clear that unlike the Haukdælir the chieftains of Skagafjörður lacked the interest or organisation to have control over the see from the outset.

A priest called Þorkell *trandill* 'a most respectable clergyman' is mentioned in *Jóns saga helga*, in one version (A) as having been St Jón's *fóstbróðir* (foster brother), in another (C) as his fosterer from his father's death and in the third (B) as his *skólabróðir* (fellow student).³ There is no saying which of the three versions is closest to the original, but as A and B are closest in meaning, it can be assumed that St Jón and Þorkell *trandill* were contemporaries and friends who had known each other since boyhood. Þorkell died in Skálholt sometime in St Jón's episcopacy, probably in its latter part. The subject of the story in *Jóns saga helga* is that St Jón in Hólar dreamt of Þorkell's death in Skálholt on the night he died. If Þorkell died in Skálholt, was perhaps educated there as well, it seems likely that he served at the cathedral. In the 14th century the monks of Þingeyrar put Þorkell *trandill* to good use and made him the *fundator* of their monastery and while this is of course not impossible the tradition is too late to be given much weight and it is then strange that the author of *Jóns saga*, brother Gunnlaugr, should have kept quiet about it (see ch. III 3.5). That then leaves us with little to say about Þorkell *trandill* except that he probably existed and may have served the cathedral at Skálholt.

Þorkell *trandill* is an obscure figure but he is likely to have existed. That is probably not the case with the priest Guthormr Finnólfsson from Laugardalur (Á) whom *Hungrvaka* mentions as being Bishop Ísleifr's preferred successor. As discussed in ch.

¹ LS, 3

² Jón Jóhannesson 1956 184, Magnús Stefánsson 1975 64

³ Bsk I, 172, 245. All three versions could be a translation of some Latin word like *confrater* which in turn was a translation of one of the others.

III 4.1. the story is suspicious and probably the author's invention to justify Gizurr's inheritance of the episcopacy. It is of course possible that the author made use of the name of some priest he knew had lived in the 11th century, but in that case we have nothing to go by on his status or career.

The case of St Jón's friend, neighbour and contemporary, the priest Sæmundr *fróði* Sigfússon in Oddi in Rangárvellir (b. 1054/6 d. 1133) is very different from that of the saint and very similar to the Haukdælir brothers. His ancestry suggests that local power had been in the hands of his family since the 10th century (whether they owned a *godðorð* or not), although the fame of some of the Oddaverjar's ancestors must be considered in the context of their considerable cultural influence in the 12th and 13th century. Judging from the marriages of Sæmundr's father and grandfather they were of considerable standing. Sæmundr's mother was the daughter of Eyjólfur *halti* of the Møðruvellingar mentioned above. Sæmundr's own marriage to a local girl, Guðrún Kolbeinsdóttir of the Vallverjar, indicates however that he was more interested in consolidating his regional powers. The important estate Vellir in Land (R) which was in the possession of the Oddaverjar in the early 13th century may have come to them through Sæmundr's marriage.¹ According to Ari *fróði* Sæmundr studied in Franconia and came back in 1076x83,² and that expedition indicates that his family had learned from the example of the Haukdælir and were bent on comparable success. Sæmundr seems to have established himself as the learned man *par excellence* in Iceland. He is widely quoted³ and neither the Tithe law, *Íslendingabók* nor the original draft of the Old Christian Law section could be composed without his advice. To what extent he laid the foundations of the later power of the Oddaverjar is however unclear. Neither he nor his sons are listed among the 13 greatest chieftains in the country in 1118,⁴ and there is no good evidence for the supremacy of the Oddaverjar in Rangárþing until the times of Sæmundr's grandson Jón Loptsson (d. 1197).⁵ Sæmundr's main contribution to his family's later prominence must have been the foundation of the *staðr* at Oddi, which his descendants attributed to him,⁶ as well as the respect he built for his family's wisdom and erudition, which no doubt helped his grandson Jón in getting King Magnús

¹ Sturl, 256, Einar Arnórsson 1944-48 236-39. According to modern folklore Sæmundr's wife was of much lower class than he - Þórður Tómasson 1966

² IFI, 20-21. Magnús Már Lárusson's 1967a 358 explanation that Ari's *Frakkland* is Franconia and not France seems the most acceptable one. Medieval tradition located Sæmundr's place of study variously at Rome - Bsk I, 156 fn 2, or Paris - IA 471, but his studies abroad had very quickly become the stuff of myth - Bsk I, 227-29, Bjarni Einarsson ed 1955 cii-cvii, also Foote 1984a 101-20

³ Ellehøj 1965 16-25

⁴ ASB XI, 53

⁵ Helgi Þorláksson 1989a 14-19

⁶ Bsk I, 283, ÁB, 31

Erlingsson to recognise their consanguinity in 1164, accepting the claim that Jón's mother Þóra was the daughter of King Magnús *berfættr* (Barelegs).¹

Although it is difficult to estimate the extent of Sæmundr's regional influence, and the Oddaverjar seem to have taken longer to consolidate power in their region in their own hands than the Haukdælir in theirs, there is no doubting the extent of Sæmundr's influence on church politics in his own day and that his reputation, if not concrete power, was one of the keys to his descendants' political success. Like Gizurr and Teitr, Sæmundr seems to have been committed to strengthening the church as an institution. The evidence for these men's secular power is circumstantial, but that of their descendants is not, and there can be little doubt that their involvement with the church, and their influence over it, was the advantage these two families had over all others, and one of the main reasons why they dominated national politics in the 12th century, and in the case of the Haukdælir right through to the end of the Commonwealth.

The evidence for 11th century priests is meagre, and it is to be expected that those who were of high birth and those who had influential descendants are over-represented. After 1100 the picture gets more complex because of the increase in source material. It is however useful to remember that the writing of records began only in the first half of the 12th century because of the introduction of the means of writing by the church, and that the reason why written records do not appear earlier must be that the church was not strong or organised enough to produce them. There are neither reasons nor indications to think that a considerable number of organised clergy existed in the country until around or after 1100. The fact that men of aristocratic birth, who either were chieftains, or had aspirations in that direction, sought ordination as priests suggests strongly that there was not a large number of priests of lower status. One of the main reasons why aristocrats became priests must have been the exclusivity such a position offered. It is possible that there was a class of itinerant priests who were sufficiently few or foreign not to detract from the status value of the chieftains' ordinations, but there is no evidence for this and such a class would at any rate have disappeared when the trend for aristocrats to take orders became more marked.

¹ ÍF XXVIII, 395. In the poem *Nóregskonungatal* Sæmundr is called *haufjuds madr /viððhluti alla* (principal in all things) - Skjald I, 589

II 4. Early church building

II 4.1 *Proto-historic evidence*

The Sagas of Icelanders, *Landnámabók* and *Kristni saga* record traditions about 35 churches which were supposed to have been built in the 11th century or earlier. Four of these are linked to tales of the conversion. Curiously enough, the four were quite insignificant or had ceased to exist when detailed sources become available: the church widely regarded as the first, Ás in Hjaltadalur (Sk), was still standing in 1238x46 according to *Kristni saga*¹ but then disappears from records. In 1984 a sheep shed at Ás was still called 'Bænahús' (chapel) and a few (apparently Christian) burials were excavated in its vicinity.² The churches at Holt in Ásar (H) and Haukagil in Vatnsdalur (H) which were supposed to have been built before 1000³ were both half-churches in the 14th and 15th centuries.⁴ The church Gizurr hvíti and Hjalti Skeggjason are supposed to have built on Horgaeyri in Vestmannaeyjar (R) the day after they came ashore on their mission to make the Icelanders accept Christianity,⁵ is not mentioned in later records.⁶ The story has clear dramatic qualities; the church building is a definite statement of the heroes' intentions; they waste no time in realising their task, and it was

¹ Bsk I, 6-7. The building of the church in 984 is also mentioned in *Páttir af Þorvaldi*, ASB XI, 72 and all the major annals, IA, 16, 48, 104, 178, 249, 315, 463

² Þór Magnússon 1985: 203

³ ASB XI, 71, 75

⁴ DI II, 475, DI V, 353, 354

⁵ Bsk I: 20, OST II, 188. The two texts are very similar and no doubt based on the same source - Gunnlaugr Leitsson's Latin Saga of Ólafur Tryggvason (written ca. 1200, now lost) has been suggested - Björn M. Olsen 1893: 263-349, Finnur Jónsson 1920-24 II, 572-577, Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1937: 120-24, Lonroth 1963: 54-94, Ólafur Halldórsson 1990b: 50

⁶ The place-name was lost in the 19th century, but was then reidentified as the eyri (= small and flat promontory) called Klemenseyri on the northern side of the harbour (Kaalund 1877 I, 279, Brynjólfur Jónsson 1918: 27-28). Whether this identification is correct or not - there is not much space between the steep cliffs of Heimaklettur and the sea - the location of this church on a small and inaccessible parcel of land on the far side of the settled area of the island must be considered strange. Skeletal remains have been found in the same area although not on the promontory itself and not in circumstances which allow it to be ascertained whether they were Christian burials (Brynjólfur Jónsson 1907a: 11, Matthías Þorðarson 1913: 37, Sigurður Sigurfinnsson 1913: 12, Brynjólfur Jónsson 1918: 27). If Klemenseyri is the same as Horgaeyri the place-name element horga- (*horgr* = pagan ritual site, pile of stones, cf. *hearg* in Old English) could suggest that this was a pagan cult place and the burials therefore pagan. The identification of Klemenseyri as Horgaeyri has led scholars to link the early church with an otherwise unknown annex-church of St Clement mentioned in a 14th century charter of Kirkjubær (DI II, 66. The charter is dated there to 1269, but is undoubtedly more recent - Brynjólfur Jónsson 1907: 10-11, Matthías Þorðarson 1913: 35-41, Hofmann 1994). A more mundane - and it seems the more original - explanation of this place-name is that a merchant of the Royal Danish trading company (17th and 18th centuries) called Klemens added to the promontory to secure the harbour (Sigurður Sigurfinnsson 1913: 13). Identifications based on place-name evidence and tales of archaeological finds will always be doubtful, although they may indicate that the 13th century authors of *Kristni saga* and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* built their story on some kind of tradition, they could have made similar connections as the 20th century scholars. Whatever the sources for this tale it is best regarded as a literary device.

fitting for the introducers of Christianity to build a church on a site where pagan rituals had been performed.

In addition to this *Landnámabók* preserves traditions about two very early churches, which are supposed to have been built by primary settlers, i.e. around 900. The one at Esjuberg (K) appears in the inventory of churches connected with Bishop Páll's counting of churches around 1200, and was still there in 1269x98 according to *Kjalnesinga saga*, but is never heard of after that.¹ Local traditions have long pointed to a site in the home field of Esjuberg,² but when investigated in 1981 it turned out to be a natural pile of stones.³ The other church, at Bjarnastaðir (B),⁴ is not mentioned in any other sources. 19th century antiquarians found a site which they identified with Bjarnastaðir, badly eroded with skeletal remains scattered on the ground around a stone foundation believed to be the remains of the church.⁵

It then turns out that the six churches connected with traditions about early Christianity and early missionary activity, were either churches of minor significance in later times or did not exist at all. In a sense this makes it more difficult to dismiss these traditions. It is far from obvious what interests should have conspired to make up stories like these. On the other hand that matters little; even if these tales were all true and these churches actually were built, their non-existence or insignificance in more recent times suggests that they were not important for the later development. The 27 churches mentioned in the Sagas of Icelanders as being built by chieftains shortly after the conversion, belong to a different kind of tradition. In 13 sagas the hero/chieftain is said to have built a church at his farm shortly after the conversion.⁶ Commonly this occurs at the end of the saga when the hero has done all his deeds, and is put among the standard conventions of ending a saga, saying that the hero had many important descendants etc. In the majority of these cases the hero is the righteous type who seeks nothing but peace and to be a good leader of men. These are not the fay types of heroes, the warriors, poets, outlaws or victims of circumstance, but the un-fay types of heroes, who were the pillars of their society and to whom in many cases a great number of people could trace their ancestry. In short, men who 13th century historical tradition knew to have been important in the late 10th and early 11th century. The best examples

¹ ÍF I, 54, 55, ÍF XIV, 5, 43, DI XV, 9

² Jónas Hallgrímsson 1989 II, 141, 415-16, 440-41, Kaalund 1877 I, 54, Brynjúlfur Jónsson 1902 33-35, Sigurður Vigfússon 1881 66

³ Þór Magnússon 1983, 193 See also Adolf Fñðnksson 1994a 100-101

⁴ ÍF I, 82

⁵ Jónas Hallgrímsson 1989 II, 415, 440-41, Kaalund 1877 I, 337-38, Brynjúlfur Jónsson 1893 75-76, Matthras Þorðarson 1909b. 45 See also JarðabÁM IV, 259-60, Adolf Fñðnksson 1994a 97-98

⁶ *Bjarnar saga Húðælakappa*, ÍF III, 163, 207; *Egils saga*, ÍF II, 298, 299; *Evrbyggja saga*, ÍF IV, 136, 183, *Funnboða saga ramma*, ÍF XIV, 324, *Flóamanna saga*, ÍF XIII, 325-26, *Fóstbræðra saga* ÍF VI, 124, *Grænlandinga saga*, ÍF IV, 269, *Hávarðar saga Ísfríðings*, ÍF VI, 357-58, *Heiðarvíga saga*, ÍF III, 235, *Laxdæla saga* ÍF V, 158, 196, 229, *Vainsdæla saga*, ÍF VIII, 126, *Víga Glúms saga*, ÍF IX, 98, *Þórhalls þátrr knapps*, ÓST II, 184-87

Table 2. Churches reported to be built before 1100

Traditions about Christian settlers:				
Esjuberg (K)	c 900	Landnáma	ÍF I, 54, 55	?
Bjarnastaðir (B)	c 925	Kjalnesinga s.	ÍF XIV, 5, 43	
		Landnáma	ÍF I, 82	Ø
Traditions about missionary activity:				
Ás in Hjaltadalur (Sk)	984	Kristni s	ASB XI, 10 ¹	?
Haukagil in Vatnsdalur (H)	982-86	Pátrr af Þorvaldi	ASB XI, 71	1/2
Holt in Ásar (H)	c 1000	Pátrr af Þorvaldi	ASB XI, 75-76	1/2
Vestmannaeyjar (R)	1000	Kristni s	ASB XI, 37	Ø
Traditions about early church building by chieftains:				
Þingvellir (Á)	c 1000	Ólafs s helga	ÍF XXVII, 214 ²	public
Skálholt (Á)	1001	Eyrbyggja s	ÍF IV, 141, 145	see
Hjalli in Ölfus (Á)	c 1000	Flóamanna s	ÍF XIII, 325-6	imp/b
Mostell in Mostellssveit (K)	c 1000	Egils s	ÍF II, 298 ³	imp/b
Borg in Mýrar (B)	c 1000	Egils s.	ÍF II, 299	imp/b
Vellir in Hítardalur (B)	1020-24	Laxdæla s	ÍF V, 158	
		Bjarnar s	ÍF III, 163, 207	Ø
Fróðá (SD)	1001	Eyrbyggja s	ÍF IV, 136	staðr
Berserkjahraun (SD)	aq 1007	Heiðarvíga s	ÍF III, 230, 235	1/2
		Eyrbyggja s	ÍF IV, 136	
Helgatell in Helgatellssveit 1) (SD)	1000-1008 2) c 1020	Ævi Snorra	ÍF IV, 186	monastery
		Ævi Snorra	ÍF IV, 186	
Ljárskógar in Dalir (SD)	c 1020	Laxdæla s.	ÍF V, 196	
		Grettis s	ÍF VII, 173	Ø
Sælingsdalstunga in Hvammssveit (SD)	aq 1031 1008	Ævi Snorra	ÍF IV, 186	imp/b
		Heiðarvíga s	ÍF III, 246-247	
Reykhólar in Reykjanes (SD)	aq 1030	Fóstibr s	ÍF VI, 124	imp/b
Finnbogastaðir in Trékyllisvík (V)	c 1000	Finnboga s	ÍF XIV, 324	Ø
Bjarg in Miðljörður (H)	c 1020	Grettis s	ÍF VII, 139, 270	1/2
Hof in Vatnsdalur (H)	c 1000	Vatnsdæla s	ÍF VIII, 126	b
Þórhallsstaðir in Forsæludalur (H)	c 1024	Grettis s	ÍF VII, 110	Ø
Reykir in Reykjastrond (Sk)	c 1032	Grettis s	ÍF VII, 269	Ø
Glaumbær in Skagafjörður (Sk)	pq 1008	Grænlandinga s.	ÍF IV, 269	imp/b
Hólar in Hjaltadalur (Sk)	1) pq 1028	Jóns s helga	Bsk I, 163	see
	2) c 1080	Jóns s helga	Bsk I, 163	
Knappsstaðir in Fljot (Sk)	c 1000	Þórhalls þ knapps	OST II, 184-7	b
Bægisá in Öxnadalur (E)	c 1050	Ljósvetninga s	ÍF X 18	staðr
Fornhagi in Horgardalur (E)	c 1000	Víga Glums s	ÍF IX, 98	Ø
Þórhallsstaðir in Þorvaldsdalur (E)	c 1000	Hávarðar s Íst	ÍF VI, 357-8	Ø
Grund in Svartáðardalur (E)	c 1000	Valla-Ljóts s	ÍF IX, 243	1/2
Eyjardalsá in Bárðardalur (Þ)	c 1026	Grettis s	ÍF VII, 209-18	b
Þvottá in Alfafjörður (A)	1011	Njáls s.	ÍF XII, 459	staðr
Svínatell in Ingólfshofðahverfi (A)	1011	Njáls s.	ÍF XII, 459	imp/staðr
Kirkjubær in Síða (VS)	1011	Njáls s	ÍF XII 322	monastery
Traditions about late 11th century churches:				
Rauðilækur in Ingólfshofðahverfi (A)	pq 1071	Sqrla þátrr	ÍF X, 113	staðr
Hólmur in Akranes (B)	pq 1049	Landnáma (H)	ÍF I, 65	b

aq = ante quem
Ø = no church known in later times
1/2 = half church
imp = residence of important chieftains in 12th or 13th century
staðr = church which owns the land which it stands on, ecclesiastical centre
b = bændakirkja or church which owns less than half the land it stands on, lesser church

pq = post quem
? = status or date of church uncertain
public = public church

¹ Also ASB XI, 72-73, 79, 1A, 16, 48, 104, 178, 249, 315, 463² Also OSHS, 325, Flat III, 247, 344, 415, ÍF VII, 344, ÍF X, 38, 41, ÍF XII, 312, ÍF XXVIII, 119, ÍF XXIX, 261, Mork, 170; ASB XI, 52³ Also *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* - ÍF III, 105

Table 2. continued**Historical sources:**

Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (R)	c 1080	Jóns s helga	Bsk. I, 157	imp/staðr
Oddi in Rangárvellir (R)	c 1080	Jóns s. helga	Bsk. I, 157	imp/staðr
Haukadalur in Biskupstungur (Á)	1082-1118	Kristni s.	ASB XI, 50	imp/b
Skálholt (Á)	pq 1080	Íslendingabók	ÍF I, 23	see
	(c. 1010	Hungrvaka	Bysp I, 76)	
Þingvallakirkja (Á)	pq 1050	Kristni s	ASB XI, 52	pubhc
Reykholt in Borgarfjörður (B)	1082-1118	Kristni s	ASB XI, 50	imp/staðr
Bær in Borgarfjörður (B)	1082-1118	Kristni s	ASB XI, 50	imp
	(aq 1049	Landnáma (H)	ÍF I, 65)	
Helgafell in Helgafellssveit (SD)	aq 1073	Laxdæla s.	ÍF V, 229	monastery
Hjarðarholt in Laxárdalur (SD)	1082-1118	Kristni s.	ASB XI, 50-51	imp/staðr
Reykholar in Reykjanes (SD)	1082-1118	Kristni s	ASB XI, 51	imp/b
Hólar in Hjaltadalur (Sk)	pq 1106	Jóns s.	Bsk. I, 163	see
Moðruvellir in Eyjafjörður (E)	1082-1118	Kristni s.	ASB XI, 51	imp/b

are Snorri *goði*, one of the most widely mentioned early chieftains,¹ and Snorri Karlsefnisson, born in Vínland and forefather of three bishops.

These were the good guys, and their goodness was of course measured in terms of 13th century ideas, which included among other things being a Christian. According to 13th century attitudes, a good chieftain meant being an active supporter and upholder of things Christian. Being good, these heroes/chieftains had to be made Christian as soon as it was chronologically possible and they had to be seen to embrace the new religion and actively support it. There are therefore literary and ideological reasons behind these tales of early churches. There may also have been contemporary political reasons for such tales in that at least 14 of them were later rich and important and owned by important people who may have found that it increased respectability to be able to claim seniority and connections with famous forefathers.

That these were ideals rather than traditions based on actual events is probably best seen in the more fictional sagas like *Finnboga saga ramma* and *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*. In both sagas the authors attempt to draw attention to otherwise little known personages. In *Finnboga saga* especially, the author tries to create an important chieftain out of a, possibly historical, figure who seems to have been remembered more for his muscular deeds than for his high position in society. *Finnbogi rammi* does at least not occur anywhere else in a chieftain capacity² It is in accordance with the author's other attempts to move his hero up the social ladder to make him build a church at his farm *Finnbogastaðir* (V).³ In the 13th century the church of that area was at Árnes which is only a few hundred metres away from *Finnbogastaðir* and there is no evidence for a church or chapel at *Finnbogastaðir* later when sources become more extensive. It could be suggested that Árnes was a more recent farm carved out of the

¹ Sigfús Blondal 1931 is an interesting study of the type of character Snorri *goði* represents

² Cf his negative portrayal in *Vatnsdæla saga* - ÍF VIII, 85-94

³ ÍF XIV, 324

land of Finnbogastaðir (although *Grettis saga's* account would not agree with that¹) or that the church had been moved. But if the author had thought so he would surely have mentioned it, like the author of *Egils saga* on the church at Mosfell (K).² The reason he did not, suggests that his story about the church at Finnbogastaðir is pure fiction intended to support the idea of Finnbogi's social importance. The same is even more true of the church which Hávarðr, in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, is supposed to have had built at Þórhallsstaðir (E) in a marginally habitable valley in the North.³ Hávarðr was not a chieftain but a respectable householder of considerable means according to his story, which is an almost comic account of how he in his old age avenged his son's death on his social superiors. In the two final chapters of the story the author is at pains to describe his hero as a man respected in his community: he has him give a splendid banquet inviting the great chieftains of his region and when he hears of King Ólafr Tryggvason converting the Norwegians he promptly sails off for Norway with his wife to be baptised and brings back wood to build a church. He dies soon afterwards but had earlier instructed his cousin Þórhallr (hence the name of the farm) to build a church at a new farm in an even more remote part of the valley, where Hávarðr was subsequently buried. This suggests that the author was in some trouble finding a credible location for his hero's church, and had to invent a remote location, or link his tale with a known place-name which happened to be in a desolate valley. In either case it is beyond reasonable doubt that the tale of Hávarðr's church is fictional and made up to emphasise his goodness. Another way of looking at this saga's rather improbable accounts of conversion and church building is to see it as a parody of older Sagas of Icelanders,⁴ in which case we can take the account of Hávarðr's conversion and posthumous church-building as confirmation that these sort of stories were seen as a standard device in medieval saga writing.

These are all 13th or 14th century traditions, which alone is sufficient reason not to take them at their face value. The only text containing similar traditions which is possibly of a 12th century date, is the so called *Ævi Snorra goða*, a short and truncated account of the main events in the life of the chieftain Snorri Þorgrímsson (b. 963/4 d. 1031) with a list of his 22 children.⁵

¹ ÍF VII, 21-22, cf. ÍF I, 198. To further compound this issue there are traditions that there was a church at Bær (between Árnes and Finnbogastaðir) before it was moved to Árnes - PP, 207, and in the home-field of Bær an enclosure is identified as the church-yard of Finnbogi *rammi* - Fornleifaskrá, 39.

² ÍF II, 298.

³ ÍF VI, 357-58.

⁴ Halldor Guðmundsson 1990.

⁵ ÍF IV, 185-86. In his edition Einar Ólafur Sveinsson argued (ÍF IV, xi-xiii) that *Ævi Snorra goða* is an early memorandum which was a source for *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, and that it had probably been put together by Arn fróði, but a reference to him in *Laxdæla saga* agrees with a clause in *Ævi Snorra goða*, (ÍF V, xxxvi-xxxvii, 226) and on Arn's own account Snorri's daughter Þuríðr was one of the main sources for *Íslendingabók* (ÍF I, 4). Einar's hypothesis has been accepted without much reservation by later scholars, (ÍBS I, 294, 357) and his argument that *Ævi Snorra goða* is an independent construction put together before *Eyrbyggja saga* or *Laxdæla saga* were written, is convincing, but the authorship of Arn,

According to this text Snorri had a church built at Helgafell (SD), presumably between 1000 and 1008, and another one at Sælingsdalstunga after he moved there in 1008. 'But some say that he had a second church built at Helgafell with Guðrún, when the church he had had built burned',¹ that is sometime between 1008 and 1031 as Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, the heroine of *Laxdæla saga*, had changed Sælingsdalstunga (SD) for Helgafell in 1008. The account of *Eyrbyggja saga* to similar effect is clearly based on this authority and therefore has no independent value.² *Laxdæla saga*'s version is slightly different; it mentions a church Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir had built at Helgafell,³ which may fit *Ævi Snorra goða*'s story about Snorri's involvement with the building of the second church at Helgafell. It then claims that Guðrún's son and successor at Helgafell, Gellir Þorkelsson (b. 1008 d. 1073/4), had a magnificent church built there, and refers to a poem about Gellir by Arnórr *jarlaskáld*⁴ which is not preserved.⁵ Here it seems the author of *Laxdæla saga* preferred a different tradition from the one available to him or her in *Ævi Snorra goða*, although an outright contradiction is avoided. There was of course more reason to emphasise the good works of the saga's main heroine and her descendants, than to give credit to a personage who was only in a supporting role in the saga.

There is no reason to discredit the traditions about early church buildings at Helgafell and Sælingsdalstunga; a poem by Arnórr *jarlaskáld* is a contemporary source for Gellir's construction work and must be taken as good evidence for what according to *Ævi Snorra goða* would have been the third church at Helgafell. *Ævi Snorra goða* is a slightly more problematic source but there are no particular grounds to dismiss it either. Whether it was Ari or somebody else who wrote it, the author was clearly somebody who had detailed knowledge of Snorri and his descendants at an earlier stage than most Sagas of Icelanders were written. Moreover it is simply likely that great chieftains like Snorri *goði* were the first to build churches in Iceland; it must have been they who led the decision to convert and who were in the best position to take advantage of the introduction of Christianity.

A smaller group of stories about early churches are not concerned with the swiftness of householders/chieftains in building churches immediately after the conversion. These stories function more as simple supports to a character description.

and therefore an early 12th century date, must remain questionable. *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga* are not believed to be written until the third quarter of the 13th century (ÍBS II, 117, 133-34) and *Ævi Snorra goða* can only be said to predate that.

¹ ÍF IV, 186 [en sumir segja, at hann léti gera í annat sinn at Helgafelli með Guðrúnu kirkju, þa er su brann, er hann hafði gera látit.]

² ÍF IV, 136, 183

³ ÍF V, 196

⁴ Arnorr Þórðarson composed poems about King Magnús Ólafsson the good and King Haraldr *harðráði* and Rognvaldr Brúason and Þorinnr Sigurðarson earls of Orkney in the middle of the 11th century - ÍBS I, 222-224, Skjald I, 332-54, Fjaldstøl 1984

⁵ ÍF V, 229

An example of this is Þorsteinn Kuggason householder at Ljárskógar (SD), who we are told had had a church built at his farm. This information comes in the introduction to this personage in *Grettis saga*, where he is praised for his industriousness and construction work. The church is not mentioned again and has no bearing on the following accounts.¹ Þorsteinn was a friend and supporter of the outlaw Grettir, and we are clearly to understand his church building as a sign of his magnanimity and social significance, if not political importance. It says something about a man that he had the drive and wealth to construct a church at his farm. Stories like these are in essence no different from the stories of chieftains building churches immediately after the conversion. They differ only in that time of construction is not given or is put slightly later into the 11th century, and that the men involved are sometimes of a lower social standing. The outcome is the same, the churches are signs of these men's goodness and greatness.

A related type of story is, for instance, as in the run up to the dramatic high point of *Njáls saga* - the burning of Njáll and his family at Bergþórshvoll (R) - when the chieftain Flosi and his party on their way to the burning stop at Kirkjubær (VS) and say their prayers at the church there.² This is but one of many indications that we are given in the saga that Flosi was entirely conscious of the wrong he was about to do, and that he resented having to do it. In other words he was a good man and his prayers at Kirkjubær are among numerous signs we are given of his goodness. The difference between this type of story and those mentioned above is that here the church itself is not the focus of attention. The church at Kirkjubær was a well known church and convent in the author's time and was on the route to Bergþórshvoll. It is therefore only a convenient prop in the narrative, with no other function than to serve as a setting for a note on the qualities of the personages involved.

Similar references to churches, where the building itself is not the focus of attention, are found in a few sagas, and normally they occur in stories with religious or spiritual connotations, where the audience/readers would have recognised well known topoi involving churches. Examples of that are the ghost stories of *Grettis saga*, where we learn of the otherwise unattested church at Þórhallsstaðir in Forsæludalur (H) because the farmhand Glámr refused to attend the church and to fast before Christmas and was promptly turned into one of the saga literature's most notorious ghosts.³ Later in Grettir's ghost busting career we hear of the church at Eyjardalsá in Bárðardalur (Þ) because a woman at a nearby farm was in the habit of going to mass at Christmas and her household began to disappear mysteriously one by one every Christmas.⁴ Both

¹ IF VII, 173

² IF XII, 322

³ IF VII, 110

⁴ IF VII, 209-10, 216-17

stories are set in the 1020's but they are also clearly representatives of common folk tales which have been told in different guises down to this day.¹ *Grettis saga* is believed to have been written shortly after 1300² and its author naturally made use of symbols which his audience would have readily understood. When piety, or lack of it, was the issue, it was natural to make use of well known topoi, with churches serving as symbols for piety, in order to get the meaning across. The same is even more true of topoi originating in Christian literature. Such are for instance the portent stories of *Njáls saga*, where blood falls on the surplice of the priest at Svínafell (A) and the priest at Þvottá (A) saw, besides his altar, into the depths of the sea with many terrors in it, both on Good Friday 1014, the same day as the battle of Clontarf was being fought, according to the saga.³ In these stories the church itself, who built it and when, is not the issue; it is only a setting and it is far from certain whether the authors of *Njáls saga* or *Grettis saga* had any clear idea of the chronological implications when they used a church as a prop in their narrative.

It is impossible to prove that the traditions regarding early churches are all fictitious, but as the context of these traditions shows them to be a literary device, the possibility that some of them were actually built very early can neither be argued for nor against. These traditions can therefore not be taken as indications for the nature or scope of early Christian activity. They do however suggest, and in this they are entirely consistent with other evidence, that the initiative for, and patronage of Christian institutions came from individual chieftains and not groups of householders collectively nor the clergy, foreign or native.

II 4.2 *The archaeological evidence*

No churches have been excavated which can with certainty be dated to the earliest phase of Christianity in Iceland.⁴ Burials and burial-practices may however be able to tell us something of the development of church building in the 11th century.

304 pagan burials, all inhumations, have been found in Iceland. Of these 100 are isolated graves, 76 are paired graves and of the rest 71 graves are found in 11 grave-fields with more than 5 graves.⁵ In his study of 246 pagan burials known in 1956 Kristján Eldjárn remarks that only in some cases can it be said to be certain that a burial

¹ Árni Björnsson 1963: 139-40

² ÍBS II, 144

³ IF XII, 459. Other Icelandic medieval sources date the battle of Clontarf to 1003 - IA, 467, 1004 - IA, 105, 179, 248 or 1005 - IA, 57

⁴ Stong would be the candidate for the earliest church-structure yet excavated. See below

⁵ Bjarni F. Einarsson 1994: 46

was in fact isolated,¹ and it is clear from his catalogue² that in the majority of such cases reports of the circumstances of the finds are either non-existent or too vague to exclude the possibility that they were parts of grave-fields. When it can be ascertained, the grave-fields seem always to be situated just outside a farmstead's home field, normally a few hundred metres from the farmhouses.³ The grave-fields seem therefore to have been used only by the inhabitants of a single farmstead. This makes much practical sense; there was no reason to take up valuable farmland for the dead, but there was also no reason to carry them long distances for burial.

Pagan burials disappear abruptly around 1000, if the stylistic dating of grave goods can be trusted. From the whole assemblage of grave goods found in Iceland there is only one brooch with an 11th century dating, of the type Rygh 656, which may in fact have gone into circulation just before 1000,⁴ so that can hardly be taken as good evidence for the continuation of pagan burial practices into the 11th century. If people really did change their burial practices immediately or soon after the conversion, where and how were people buried then? Even if we decide to take those sagas of Icelanders seriously which tell of church building by chieftains just after 1000, it is still difficult to believe that there were enough churches in the country in the first decades of the 11th century, to receive all the corpses which befell in the country without people having to travel long distances. It may have been within the means of the jetsetters of the age, like Kjartan Ólafsson, but for ordinary people that is too much of a break with custom to consider.

There are suggestions in the archaeological literature that there was an intermediate stage in burial practices. At Jarðbrú in Svarfaðardalur (E) 5 inhumations in 4 graves have come to light during construction work this century. No grave goods were found in any of the graves and all were aligned SSW-NNE, facing SSW. One of the skeletons lay on its side (grave II), but the others were stretched on their backs with arms straight down the sides. In one of the graves (II) traces of wood and iron were found, indicating a coffin. In grave III stones had been lined around the upper half of the corpse and a large slab put above the head. The 5 corpses seem to have been the only ones ever buried in this locality. Jarðbrú is the next farm to Tjorn where the parish-church of the area was, and this led Kristján Eldjárn to suggest that there could hardly have been a church or chapel at Jarðbrú as well, and that the graves must therefore be from the 11th century when people had ceased pagan burial customs, but had not yet established Christian cemeteries.⁵

¹ Kristján Eldjárn 1956: 195, see also 197-201

² Kristján Eldjárn 1956: 28-193

³ Kristján Eldjárn 1956: 201-205

⁴ Kristján Eldjárn 1956: 428-29

⁵ Kristján Eldjárn 1964. See also below on similar claims for the single burial at Hallfredarstaðir in Tunga (A)

The graves at Jarðbrú have not been dated; the absence of surface structures (i.e. church, chapel, cemetery wall) is far from certain. The graves were discovered in the course of construction work in the 1930s and 1950s and there is no way of telling what structures could have been on the surface earlier. In his report Kristján Eldjárn says he dug several trial holes to look for further graves; enough to convince himself that there were not more, but no details are given, and it is therefore impossible to verify his conclusion. Furthermore there are several examples of churches and chapels situated on adjacent farms,¹ so the proximity to Tjorn cannot be taken as an argument for the non-existence of a church or chapel at Jarðbrú. Although Kristján Eldjárn's theory cannot be refuted, and will remain a distinct possibility, it is only one among several possible explanations for the graves at Jarðbrú. While the remains have not been dated their relevance for the discussion of 11th century burial practices will remain limited.²

A more exciting but unverifiable tale comes from Hrafnagil in Eyjafjorður (E). Hrafnagil was a parish-church until 1863 and the location of the latest church is still marked by a single grave in the home-field. According to a place-name inventory for this farm the farmhouses had formerly stood some 100-150 metres to the north and somewhat higher up in the slope above the present farmhouses. A hill protrudes from the slope at this location and there, in some unspecified past, several skeletons were found, judged to be Christian, apparently on account of their alignment. This would not be surprising if a horse-skull and a shield had not also come to light, if not on the same occasion then at least in the same location. According to the present farmer 7 inhumations came to light in this location in 1958 in the course of construction work. All the inhumations were apparently aligned north-south but no grave-goods were found with them. The bones were reburied and the find was not investigated at the time and the exact location of the finds cannot be pinpointed on account of recent rearrangement of the landscape.³ It is therefore impossible to decide what to make of this, as well as the tale of the earlier location of the farmhouses.

The idea that there was some sort of transitional stage is however appealing; if people did discontinue pagan burial practices immediately or very shortly after the conversion, some sort of solution must have been found to accommodate the corpses that befell in the period until a church had been built within a reasonable distance of every farmstead. In the present state of research we can only speculate on what form this solution took, but this is one of the fields where further investigations may produce fresh evidence.

¹ For instance Fell, Skalá and Hraun in Slettahlíð (Sk) - *DI* V, 355, Holtastaðir and Geitaskarð in Langidalur (H) - *DI* II, 471-72. Árskógur, Litli Árskógur and Brattavellir on Arskógsströnd (E) - *DI* V, 356.

² Cf. Guðmundur Ólafsson 1984 and criticisms in Adolf Fríðriksson 1994a: 98-100 of this type of explanation in archaeology.

³ Jónas Rafnar wrote the place-name inventory around 1950, the present farmer is Hjalti Jónsson, both quoted in Orri Vesternsson & Adolf Fríðriksson 1994: 95.

Two incentives for building a church without a realistic prospect of services being given in it regularly can be proposed. One was that building and maintaining a church increased or affirmed a man's prestige and social standing, and the other was to provide consecrated ground for the dead.

In some sagas of Icelanders there are accounts of the relocation of churches and re-burial of the bones, usually an opportunity for the author to comment on the shape and characteristics of his hero's appearance or personality.¹ Such tales are therefore liable to be literary clichés rather than reliable traditions, although the re-burials are usually set much closer to the author's times than the saga itself, in the 12th century as opposed to the 10th. In all the cases it seems that the churches were not moved a great distance; Grímr at Mosfell (K) built a church there soon after the conversion, we are told by the author of *Egils saga*, but in the time of the priest Skapti Þórarinnsson (mentioned in 1121 and 1143) that same church was moved from a place called Hrísbú to Mosfell.² Hrísbú is now a neighbouring farm to Mosfell, some 260 metres separate the farmhouses, and was most probably a part of the original estate of Mosfell. At Hjalli in Olfus (Á), the Lawspeaker Skapti Þóróddsson (1004-30) is said to have built a church when his wife broke her leg while washing her linen. We are told that he built his church on the other side of the brook, but that the bones of his father, Þorgils *Þorrabeinsstjúpr* and Bjarni the wise were later moved to the place where the church now stands.³ It seems therefore that the church was moved from across the brook, closer to the farmhouses. No dating is given for the re-burial at Hjalli, but at Sælingsdalstunga (SD) the church was relocated in the lifetime of Guðný Þóðvarsdóttir who died in 1221⁴, and at Reykír in Reykjaströnd (Sk) the church was relocated 'in the time of the Sturlungar' which probably refers to the first half of the 13th century.⁵ It may also be that the wording in *Oddaverju þáttir* that Jón Loftsson had a church and monastic buildings built north of the brook at Keldur (R) (c. 1190),⁶ where the farm and church still are, indicates that the church had formerly stood on the southern side of the brook.⁷

A similar account is found in a version of *Ólafs saga helga*, where we are told that Björn *Hítaldelakappi* was buried at Vellir in Hítardalur (B), but that when nearby

¹ Also Bjarni Einarsson 1976, Heller 1984, Helgi Þorláksson 1992a: 303-315

² IF II, 298-99

³ *Flóamanna saga* - IF XIII, 325-26

⁴ *Ivrbyggja saga* - IF IV, 183-84: 1A, 24, 126, 326. Guðný had been married to Hvamm-Sturla by 1171 - Sturl, 76 and the reference is probably to the period when she lived in Hvammssveit

⁵ IF VII, 269. On the saga author's source for this passage, see Sigurður Nordal 1938: 16, Kolbrunn Haraldsdóttir 1986: 50

⁶ [Jón Loftsson lét smíða kirkju ok klaustrihus lítt norðan Læk, at Keldum] - Bsk I, 293

⁷ The church at Skarð in Skarðsströnd could also be considered in this context according to *Geirmundar þáttir heljarskunnis* it was situated in a grove on Geirmundr's land [einn hvammur í landi Geirmundar í þeim sama stað er nú stendur kirkja að Skarði] - Sturl, 5. Although it is not unambiguous the wording does not suggest close proximity to home field or farmhouses

Húsafell in the same valley became a *staðr*, the church at Vellir was relocated and all the bones moved to Húsafell.¹

In an episode preserved in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, one Þórhallr *knappr* of Knappsstaðir in Fljót (Sk) had a dream in the winter before the conversion. He dreamt that a regally attired man came to him, riding a white horse with a golden spear and led him to the fence surrounding his home field and told him to build a house there to the glory of the one and only true God. The man then marked the plan of the house on the ground with his spear and gave Þórhallr details of how it should be constructed, adding that he should use the timber from the temple that stood some distance from the farm.² This 14th century story is either a fabrication or a refashioning of a local tradition, but in neither case can it be without significance that the church is supposed to have been built by the home field fence. It must be either because the church at Knappsstaðir was thus situated at the time this was composed or had been in recent times, or because the author knew such locations to be more original and felt that adding this detail would add a flavour of authenticity.

In addition to these medieval traditions there are numerous tales recorded in the 18th and 19th centuries about churches originally having stood some distance from the farm and then moved for various reasons.³

A curious set-up is found at Eyvindarmúli in Fljótshlíð (R), where in the early 16th century there was both a church and a chapel.⁴ The church at Eyvindarmúli was a parish church with a tithe area of only two farms. It is mentioned in Bishop Páll's inventory of churches from around 1200 and several 14th century charters.⁵ The church was abolished in 1898 but by that time the chapel had long vanished. The church was presumably situated close to the farmhouses but according to a 19th century account the chapel was situated on a hill called Kapelluhóll 'chapel-hill' in the home field of an adjacent farm which was originally a cottage from Eyvindarmúli. In other words the chapel was situated just outside the home field of Eyvindarmúli. In the same account it is described that human burials had been found where the chapel had been situated and that there was a path 'obviously made by ancient men' between the chapel site and the farmhouses at Eyvindarmúli.⁶ This is the only known example of an Icelandic farm

¹ [Biorn var grafinn æ Uðllum þvat þar var þa kirkia hildi Biorn þar lengi síþan þar til er staðr eflðir at Húsafelli var þa upp tekin kirkian æ Uðllum ok grafinn garðrinn ok aull bein færð í Hitar dal þau er þar hölðu iðrðut uent] - ÓSHS, 766 c1 *Bjarnar saga Hítudalokappu*, ÍF III, 134, 163, 206-207

² OST II, 184-87

³ Olafur Larusson 1944 341, also Buðardalur in Skarðsströnd (SD) - JarðabÁM VI, 146, Kalfafell in Fellshverfi (A) - Jon Þorkelsson 1921-23 253, Sauðanes on Langanes (A) - Stefan Einarsson 1994 300, Staður in Steingrímsljórður (V) where the folktale has the earlier church far west of the present farmstead - Jon Arnason 1954-61 IV, 36, while skeletal remains have been found on the eastern edge of the farmland - Svata Pétursdóttir, Hrólfberg 3 8.1990 (Orri Vésteinsson 1990 157).

⁴ DI IX, 648-49

⁵ DI XII 6, DI II, 686, III, 216, 404 IV, 76-77

⁶ Þórður Tomasson 1983 107-109

with two churches and this may suggest that when the church at Eyvindarmúli was relocated the earlier church outside the home field was not torn down but maintained, presumably for the private devotion of the household at Eyvindarmúli. Eyvindarmúli was a rich farm and the residence of important families. The 19th century account mentions specifically a Hólmfríður Einarsdóttir *hin ríka*, 'the rich', who was a wealthy landowner in the early 16th century and lived at Eyvindarmúli.¹ It explains that the path between chapel and farmhouses is called Hólmfríðargata 'Hólmfríð's path'

and it is an old tale that mistress Hólmfríður Einarsdóttir had this path made when she lived at Eyvindarmúli and that she was very fond of this chapel and went there to say her prayers every morning²

The fact that the word for chapel preserved in the place name is *kapella* and not *bænhús* suggests a more private and aristocratic establishment than the chapels mentioned in charters.³ It is of course possible that the chapel at Eyvindarmúli was a late medieval establishment, built by an aristocratic family for its private devotion. It is however equally likely that the chapel represents the original church site and that it was maintained after the church was moved closer to the farmhouses because the owners wanted to have a separate place for their prayers and their dead away from the ordinary folk who were allowed into the parish church. It may be that this can be linked with 12th century attitudes that a church was not only a private property but was to be used exclusively by its owners and that admitting strangers into it or into the cemetery was an intrusion into the family's privacy.⁴ The fact that the tithe area of Eyvindarmúli was very small suggests that it was a late developer and this may reflect the owners' reluctance to take on parochial responsibilities. When the householders of Eyvindarmúli accepted the responsibility of burying people from the two nearby farms and allowed their priest to minister to them they may therefore have decided to build a new church which suited that purpose better than the old church, one which was possibly larger and closer to the farmhouses, but retaining the old church as a private oratory and family graveyard.

Archaeological evidence is of little help in this context; it is not unthinkable that the graves at Jarðbrú described above constitute the first Christian cemetery of Tjorn, in which case it was used only for a very short while before a church was built closer to the farmhouses at Tjorn. To argue for this possibility it must first be shown that the farm Jarðbrú was carved out of the land of Tjorn in the 11th century or later. At Stóraborg (R) remains of secular buildings were found beneath the cemetery, suggesting that the church could have been relocated there, but the lack of dating of the material as

¹ Páll E. Ólason 1944 391-92

² Þorður Tómasson 1983 108 Also in Jon Árnason 1954-61 III, 71

³ *Kapella* is in Icelandic contexts almost always used of side-chapels in larger churches - Magnús Már Lárusson 1963c

⁴ Orri Vesteinsson forthcoming

well as the possibility that the farm itself had been relocated (in the 13th century?) and that the church is a late medieval foundation makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions from this evidence.¹

In 1987 human remains were found in a small hill some 150-200 metres from the farmhouses at Hallfreðarstaðir in Tunga (A). The finds were made during construction work and before a controlled investigation could be made incomplete remains of a man and a horse were revealed. The investigation revealed an inhumation in a very small coffin without any grave-goods, aligned almost exactly east-west. The bones were believed to be of a child, perhaps 10-12 years old.² The corpse had originally been laid on its back with hands along the sides.³ It is suggested by the excavator that the grave might be from the earliest Christian times when grave-goods were no longer put with the deceased but before burial in sacred ground was fully established. There was no dating for this grave and there is therefore no particular reason to believe it must be ancient. There are no indications about annex-churches or chapels in the ministry of Kirkjubær and there may well have been a church or chapel at Hallfreðarstaðir, which is one of the larger farms in the ministry.

According to the Land register of 1712 a chapel was still standing at Valþjófsstaðir in Núpasveit (Þ) but services had not been given in it for as long as men could remember.⁴ The farmer at Valþjófsstaðir wrote in 1954 that the chapel ruin was situated outside the home-field some 280 metres from the farmhouses. A doorway could be seen on the ruin's west side and there was a circular wall around it and inside the wall small hummocks which could have been graves.⁵ Magnús Már Lárusson has made a compelling case that it was this church which burnt in 1361 according to an annal,⁶ and if that is so it had presumably been demoted to a chapel sometime before the 17th century, although complete faith cannot of course be put in the accurate usage of these concepts. Whether this was a church or a chapel the indications are that in this case it was never relocated and always stood outside the home field.⁷ Whereas we do know that all churches stood close to the farmhouses in modern times, we have very scant knowledge of the locations of the almost 1000 chapels which existed in Iceland in the middle ages and it may very well be that many of them were never relocated.

Ólafur Lárusson has made the case that the reason for at least some of the 26 Kirkjuból farm names known in Iceland was that they were the original locations of

¹ Mjoll Snæsdóttir 1988 20-22, Ólafur Lárusson 1944 141-42, Páll Sigurðsson 1865

² An osteological analysis was not carried out

³ Guðrun Kristinsdóttir 1988 95-97

⁴ JarðabAM XI, 327

⁵ Halldór Stefánsson quoted in Magnús Már Lárusson 1967c 193

⁶ IA, 226, Magnús Már Lárusson 1967c 150-52

⁷ The possibility that there was a more recent chapel ruin closer to the farmhouses cannot of course be ruled out although there is nothing in particular to suggest this

churches which were later moved to more prominent farms.¹ His prime example is that of Kirkjubólstaður in Hólmur in Akranes (B), but according to *Landnámabók* and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta* Halldórr Illugason is supposed to have built the church at Innri-Hólmur on the site of the grave and hut of the Christian primary settler and hermit Ásólfur *alskikk*, and Ásólfur is said to have lived at Kirkjubólstaður.² Kirkjuból(staður) and Innri-Hólmur share the same field, and have been farmed separately at least since the 13th century, Kirkjuból owned by the church at Hólmur.³ It seems clear that at least the author of the *Hauksbók* version of this tale was describing the present location of the church. Ásólfur's 'hut was where the church is now'⁴ The *Sturlubók* version and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* locate the church on Ásólfur's grave, which may of course have been close to the hut, and indicate that it was some distance from the farmhouses at Innri-Hólmur. *Sturlubók* has it by the path to the cow-shed but *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* by the path to the pen where cows or sheep were milked.⁵ The church was clearly not situated next to the farmhouses at Hólmur, but whether it was only a stone's throw away or some greater distance, or if it was where the farmstead Kirkjuból is now located cannot be deduced from these sources. Kirkjuból may just as well have got its name because it was a part of the original estate donated to the church and farmed separately on behalf of the church.

It may be that the rather detailed regulations in the Old Christian Law section on re-burial of human remains in case of a church being moved⁶ were put together because of frequent moving of churches from outside the home field to the farmhouses, but it is more likely that the legislators had in mind relocation because of natural catastrophes. It is stated that churches shall only be relocated on account of landslides, floods, fire, storm or general devastation of an area, or if the bishop gives his permission.⁷

These examples indicate that some churches at least were originally built some distance from the farmhouses, and that in the 12th and early 13th centuries such churches were being moved closer to the farmhouses, probably to be situated as was

¹ Olafur Lárússon 1944 336, 340-47. On Olafur Lárússon's hypothesis in general it may be noted that chapels or annex-churches are known to have been at the majority of the Kirkjuból farms, but only two parish-churches which both seem to be late-medieval upgrades from lesser churches. Only three of the Kirkjuból farms were relatively rich, but most were middle sized. This pattern compares very well with the Kirbisters (ON = Kirkjubólstaðir) of Orkney which are generally not among the richest farms and did not have parish-churches (Marwick 1931 29-32). This has been interpreted as a sign of a secondary phase of settlement (Crawford 1987 113) and it may well be that a similar explanation applies to Iceland, i.e. that many of the Kirkjuból farms were only founded after the conversion, even much later. The highest concentration of these farm names is in the Northwest where there seems to have been a significant population increase from the 13th century onwards as a result of increased importance of fishing, and the Kirkjuból may either be new foundations or the result of established farms being subdivided, the one with the church acquiring this new name.

² IF I, 63-5 OST I 278-79 Olafur Lárússon 1944 301-304

³ DI I 416

⁴ Þar var koti hans, sem nú er kirkjan | -IF I 63

⁵ OST I, 278

⁶ Grg Ia 12-13

⁷ The evidence from Stong supports this interpretation, see also Jon Støffensen 1967

customary in late medieval and modern times: a few metres in front, and towards the other end, of the farmhouse-row.¹ It is impossible not to connect this with the pre-Christian practice of situating grave fields just outside the home-field, a few hundred metres from the farmhouses. It does also make good sense: in the 11th century churches were situated on the same principle as pre-Christian grave-fields, because their main function was in connection with the cemeteries. It is of course possible that there could have been consecrated cemeteries without any church structure,² but that does not alter the issue here, because if the cemetery preceded the church, the church's subsequent building in or adjacent to it suggests that the burial function was still the most important, or at least that no other function was important enough to affect a change of location. This was in a period when the few available priests either travelled around or were in the service of the few chieftains who could afford them. If services were only given infrequently and irregularly at a church, when an itinerant priest happened by, its principal use for its owner and his household must have been funereal and commemorative - there is hardly any other regular use imaginable - and it is unlikely that the prestige earned by building a church depended on its exact location; the structure itself was testament enough to a man's piety and wealth. The same applies if early churches were used as places of prayer, remembering the decrees attributed to St Jón, exhorting people to say their prayers regularly at a cross or in church.³ We have no way of knowing if such religious devotion was widespread among the populace in the 11th century, but even if it was it is difficult to imagine that it could have been the decisive factor in the building of the high number of churches, which can be accounted for by the funereal explanation.

Another possible influence on the early building of churches might have been the desire to have a sanctuary nearby, to which people flee to in times of trouble. Respect for the immunity of people who sought refuge in church seems to have been established as the norm, if not always the practice, by the 13th century.⁴ However, neither the Old Christian Law section nor the oldest Scandinavian legislation

¹ As at Kúabót (VS) - Gísli Gestsson & Lilja Árnadóttir 1987 Teikning 2, and Stóraborg (R) - Mjöll Snæsðóttir 1988 9. From many of the references to churches in the contemporary sagas it is clear that they were situated adjacent to the farmhouses - Sturl, 152, 175, 311, 391, 494 cf. 690-91, 554-55, 565, whereas in other they may have been some distance away but within the home field - Sturl, 356, 507-508, 667-68.

² As may have been the case in Norway, where excavations of church floors have in several instances revealed Christian burials beneath the earliest wooden church, see Muller 1991.

³ Only in the A version - Bsk I, 164. See also ch III 1.

⁴ There are numerous examples of people seeking refuge in church - Sturl, 63, 152, 169, 391, 422-23, 480, 482, 507-508, 509, 555-56, 591, 634, 639-41, 646, 648, 667-68, 670, 673, 683-84, 690-91, 705, 753, 756, 762, and of property being stored there for safety - Sturl, 175, 443, 472, 651, 718, but also of people being dragged out of church - Sturl, 70, 256, 475, 653, 762-63 cf. 488, 510; of churches being attacked - Sturl, 494, of battles in graveyards - Bsk I, 512-13, Sturl, 266, of men being killed or maimed in church - Sturl, 133-229, of property being robbed from a church - Sturl, 378, 472, 527, 643, 651, IA, 129, and of threats to burn churches where people had sought refuge - Sturl, 169.

acknowledge this,¹ and lack of this respect was one of the worries Archbishop Eysteinn (1161-88) had about the religious conduct of the Icelanders.² With that sort of evidence we cannot consider the prospect of sanctuary as one of the motives for early church building. It may however have influenced the relocation of churches from outside the home field to the farmhouses in the early 13th century when conflict was escalating but respect for sanctuary was at the same time becoming established. As is evident from the many descriptions in the Sturlunga compilation of people scrambling into churches on the sudden arrival of a hostile war band, it was eminently more practical to have the church near at hand than far away outside the home field. A less compelling consideration may have been a church's capacity to serve as defence works. There are no indications that churches were deliberately built as fortifications in Iceland as in Southern and Eastern Scandinavia³ - the lack of building-stone no doubt being the basic reason - but there are a number of examples of churches and cemetery walls being used in active defence and even of war bands adding wooden constructions to strengthen the defences of the pre-existing constructions.⁴ Richer householders and chieftains who played the most dangerous politics seem as a rule to have had some fortifications at or near their estates, but for others who invested less in conflicts but nevertheless might need to defend themselves a high and well-built cemetery wall near at hand may have been a basic precaution.⁵

If a large number of churches were built in the 11th century because of the need for household-cemeteries, that goes some way to explain two features of the ministry system.

- One is the sheer number of churches and chapels known from late medieval times. In the 14th and 15th centuries there was a chapel or church at more than every third farmstead in the country, if the normal population was around fifty thousand that means there was a church or chapel to every 30 to 40 persons. There is no evidence available which can tell us whether all these chapels and churches existed in the 12th or 13th centuries, we only know that chapels and lesser churches were known. On the other hand there is also no evidence suggesting that there had been a sudden increase in the building of churches or chapels just before reliable sources for the number of dependent churches and chapels become available. The only thing we do know is that in the beginning of the 14th century the majority of churches and chapels had already been built, and their numbers did not increase significantly after that.⁶

¹ Nilsson 1989: 150-54

² DI I, 291.

³ Tuulse 1960, Anglert Mant 1984

⁴ Adoll Eðnksson 1994b 6-9

⁵ Guðbrandur Jonsson 1919-29 78 84 made much of the defensive capacity of circular graveyards, criticised in Olsen 1966 200-201

⁶ Judging mainly from *Audunarmáldagar* from 1318 compared with the inventory of churches and chapels from 1486-7

- The other feature is the common association of skeletal remains with chapels or annex-churches. All excavations of chapels or annex-churches in Iceland have revealed surrounding graves and there are several reports of skeletal remains coming to light in the course of construction work where annex-churches or chapels have formerly been situated.

At Varmá in Mosfellssveit (K) where there was a half-church, graves were observed in connection with the excavation of the church structure which was dated to the 14th century.¹

At Kirkjuból in Skutulsfjörður (V) where there was a half-church which had burial rights in 1333 a cemetery has also been excavated.²

At Álfadalur in Ingjaldssandur (V) where a disused chapel was still standing in the early 18th century, skeletons have come to light at the chapel site.³

At Hella in Árskógsströnd (E) where there was a half-church in ruins in 1487, 15 skeletons have come to light.⁴

At Kross in Skarðsströnd (SD) where there was an annex-church in the 14th century - a quarter-church rather than half-church - two graves have been excavated along with a small church structure.⁵

At Kirkjuból in Kollsvík (V) where there was a half-church before the Reformation human bones have been found.⁶

At Kirkjuból in Reykjafjörður (V) where there was an annex-church or chapel according to 18th century tradition, coffins and bones were visible around 1800 where the sea had eroded the shoreline.⁷

At Brekka in Dýrafjörður (V) where 18th century folk-memory placed a chapel, remains of several skeletons in very small graves were uncovered during construction work early this century.⁸

At Sæból in Aðalvík (V), where there was a chapel, human remains were uncovered in the course of construction work around 1933.⁹

At Torfufell in Eyjafjörður (E), where according to 18th tradition there had been a chapel, a human skeleton has come to light close to the farmhouses.¹⁰

¹ AM 263 104 leaf 63, also DI III, 220, DI IV, 112 Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1971

² DI II, 699-700 The excavation was carried out by Magnús Þorkelsson but no report has yet been made available

³ JarðabÁM VII, 89 Jóhannes Davíðsson 1959 127

⁴ DI V, 356 Adolf Friðriksson & Orri Vésteinsson 1989

⁵ DI II, 635-36, DI IV, 157-59 Kristján Eldjárn 1974

⁶ JarðabÁM VI, 316, DI VIII, 268 Matthias Þorðarson 1924 45, Íslenzkir annalar III, 544-45

⁷ JarðabÁM VII, 315-16, Ólafur Olavíus 1964-65 I, 172-73, Ólafur Lárusson 1944 321-23 Þorvaldur Thoroddsen 1913-15 II, 82

⁸ JarðabÁM VII, 45 Gunnar Guðmundsson 1978 93-94

⁹ DI XII, 694-98 JarðabÁM VII, 288-89 Lýður B Björnsson 1975 119

¹⁰ JarðabÁM X, 254, Angantýr H Hjálmarsson & Pálmi Kristjánsson 1957 110

At Belgsholt in Melasveit (B) where there was probably one of the chapels in the ministry of Melar, a small excavation trench revealed one skeleton from the 16th century.¹

At Ljárskógar (SD) where a church is mentioned in *Grettis saga*, but no other medieval source, skeletal remains were uncovered in the 19th century.²

At Ás in Hjaltadalur (Sk) where Þorvarðr Spak-Boðvarsson is supposed to have built a church in 984 and which was still standing in 1238³ according to *Kristni saga* apparently Christian graves were uncovered in 1984.³

At Syðra Fjall in Aðaldalur (P) where there is no documentary evidence for a church, a church and cemetery were partly excavated in 1915.⁴

At Skarfanæs in Land (R), Kjallaksstaðir in Fellsstrond (SD), Krossanes in Strandir (V), Ytri Tjarnir in Staðarbyggð (E), Steinkirkja in Fnjóskadalur (E), Hallfreðarstaðir in Tunga (A) and Neðranes in Stafholtstungur (B) skeletal remains have been uncovered, identified as remains of Christian burials,⁵ and at Hof in Hjaltadalur (Sk) at least 12 Christian burials have been excavated,⁶ but for none of these places is there any documentary or archaeological evidence for church or chapel.

At Stong in Þjórsárdalur (Á) a re-excavation of the small structure between the farmhouse and the cow-shed which was interpreted in the 1939 excavation as a pantry,⁷ has revealed that it is built on top of a church-like structure which in turn is built on top of a smithy. The identification of the structure in the middle as a church is based mainly on surrounding graves which were dug from the same level, and later emptied. Preliminary results suggest a dating between the second half of the 11th century and the middle of the 12th.⁸ The settlement in Þjórsárdalur ceased in the first half of the 13th century according to the latest theories,⁹ and there is no documentary evidence for churches either at Stong or at Skeljastaðir, also in Þjórsárdalur (Á), where a large cemetery was excavated in 1939.¹⁰ There is therefore no way of guessing the status of

¹ DI I, 271-2, 419, DI IV, 192-93. Adólf Friðriksson & Orri Vésteinsson 1992: 54-56.

² IF VII: 173. Sigurður Vigfusson 1882: 79.

³ ASB XI, 10. The building of the church in 984 is also mentioned in *Þáttur af Þorvaldi*, ASB XI, 72 and all the major annals, IA, 16, 48, 104, 178, 249, 315, 463. Þór Magnússon 1985: 203.

⁴ Johannes Þorkelsson 1916.

⁵ Brynjólfur Jónsson 1907b: 27-28, Þór Magnússon 1983: 193, Lýður B. Björnsson 1972b: 9. Adólf Friðriksson & Orri Vésteinsson 1995: 37, Margrét Hermanns-Auðardóttir 1995: 28-31, Guðrún Kristinsdóttir 1988: 95-97, Lilja Árnadóttir 1982. Place-name evidence can also suggest burials at farms where there were only chapels or annex-churches as at Sela in Arskógsstrond (E) where there was a chapel - DI V, 356. Johannes O. Sæmundsson 1978: 85.

⁶ Guðmundur Ólafsson 1984. See Adólf Friðriksson 1994: 98-100 for criticism on the dating of this site. Roussel 1943.

⁸ The research at Stong is directed by Vilhjálmur Orri Vilhjálmsson but no report of the church-like ruin has as yet been made available.

⁹ Vilhjálmur Orri Vilhjálmsson 1989. The demise of the settlement had previously been connected with the eruption of Mt. Hekla (R) in 1104, while 18th and 19th century traditions had connected it with the eruption of 1300.

¹⁰ Matthias Þorðarson 1943.

these churches, although in the case of Stong it is difficult to believe that the church there had a large tithe-area, both on account of the location of the farmstead and the size of the church structure.¹

In addition to cemeteries which have been archaeologically investigated there are many reports of skeletal remains having come to light during construction work or as a result of erosion at farmsteads where there were churches or chapels in the middle ages.² Such reports have never been collected into a single list, so it is difficult to estimate how many they are, but through interviews with farmers in connection with archaeological surveys five such instances are known to this author.³

Considering that no systematic efforts have been made in Iceland to survey burial places and the small amount of archaeological research that has taken place, this is a good harvest and suggests that it was common to have cemeteries in connection with chapels and half-churches. That would seem to contradict the interpretation of the late 13th and early 14th century legal texts that burial was the privilege of parish-churches. The problem is that except for Varmá, Stong and Skeljastaðir no datings are available for any of the cemeteries. The single skeleton at Belgsholt datable to the 16th century does not preclude the possibility that the rest of the cemetery had been in use for a long time. The datings of the cemeteries at Varmá to the 14th century and later and at Stong and Skeljastaðir to the 11th and 12th centuries, do not allow many conclusions to be drawn, although together these datings suggest that lesser churches and chapels did have cemeteries in all periods down to the Reformation. If the half-church at Varmá was first founded in the 14th century, it is equally plausible that it acquired burial rights because it was normal for half-churches to have them and had always been so, as it may be that annex-churches only began to acquire burial-rights in the 14th century, just as their rights to tithes, baptism, marriage and churching of women seem to have been on the increase from the 14th century onwards.⁴ The latter alternative seems slightly less likely, considering the strong emphasis in the legal texts of the same period on the privilege of parish-churches in respect of burial. This emphasis would make it strange for new cemeteries to be consecrated at lesser churches. It is also worth noting the fact that foundation charters of half-churches from the 14th and 15th centuries normally do

¹ At Kuabot in Álltaver (VS) no graves were revealed in connection with the church like structure there, but the excavation stopped short of the floor levels - Gísli Gestsson & Lilja Árnadóttir 1987

² Kristján Eldjárn 1964-66 says that every year the National Museum is informed of skeletal finds, but these seem normally not to have been investigated, and no files are available of such reports

³ At Staðarbakki in Helgafellssveit (SD) (half-church - PP, 153) - Margrét Kjartansdóttir 22 7 1990 [Orn Vésteinsson 103-104], Svínatell in Hornaljordur (A) (chapel in 1358 - DI III, 126-27, later half-church - DI III, 242-43) - Jón Helgason 24 6 1992 [Orn Vésteinsson 1992a 13], Höll in Svartardalur (H) (chapel in 1486 - DI V, 352) - Sigurjón Þ Stefánsson 14 8 1992 [Orn Vésteinsson 1992b 6], Lomatjorn in Kjálki (E) (chapel in 1487 - DI V, 357) - Sigríður Schiøt 16 8 1992 [Orn Vésteinsson 1992b 18], Þverá in Fnjóskadalur (E) (half-church in 1487 - DI V, 357) - Skímir Jonsson 16 8 1992 [Orn Vésteinsson 1992b 21]

⁴ Orn Vésteinsson forthcoming

not mention burial rights. When they do it is impossible to say if the cemetery was new or if it had been associated with the chapel which the half-churches always seem to be upgrades of.¹

The following can therefore be argued. In the 11th century, before there were many priests around and before bishops can be expected to have been able to exercise their prerogative to decide the location of cemeteries in any systematic manner, people must have been buried somewhere. Pagan burial practices were clearly discontinued, and it must therefore be assumed that an alternative was found. The solution which has been suggested here is that consecrated cemeteries were located by the same principle as that governing the location of pagan grave-fields - outside the farmstead's home field - and that such cemeteries were common and on the whole not shared by the inhabitants of many farmsteads, but looked on as the preserve of a single household. Churches need not have been built in connection with these cemeteries, but it seems nevertheless to have been common, whether the church was built when the cemetery was first consecrated or added later.² At first the main practical function of these structures must have been funereal and commemorative, very little else in the way of regular religious services can be expected to have been held there. This is a point which seems to be borne out by the size of the church structure at Stong, which has a floor-space not much in excess of 3 x 4 metres. Such a small space cannot have been intended for big crowds of people attending elaborate ceremonies; it is more likely that such small buildings were intended mainly to furnish a respectable setting for funerals and remembering the dead, as well as the private prayers of the household. These proposed early funereal churches were then the ancestors of what in the 12th century and later came to be classified as chapels and lesser churches (*sönghús*, *hálf kirkjur* et c), which - judging from the archaeological evidence - were a customary place of burial for at least members of the household of the estate where they stood.

¹ As at Engcy (K) in 1379 - DI III, 338-39

² Cf. that in Norway at Mære, Lom, Høre, Ringebu and other places: the earliest churches were built in already existing Christian cemeteries - Skre 1988: 8

III THE FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS

III 1. The idea of a Golden Age 1082-1122

Except for *Íslendingabók* all the sources which describe events in the early 12th century were composed in the early 13th century or later. They agree in painting a favourable picture of this period in which all the major Christian institutions emerged. These traditions have at their roots the image of Bishop Gizurr's (1082-1118) unrivalled authority which was evidenced on the one hand in his achievements in laying the foundations of the Icelandic church - the two sees and the tithes - and on the other in the peace that prevailed under his strong leadership. The idea of a period of peace was accentuated by the dramatic events which were seen to put an end to it and which are the subject of *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*.

The way in which the authors of *Hungrvaka* and *Kristni saga* describe Gizurr's episcopacy make it out to be advantageous for the whole country but they nevertheless represent a basically southern outlook. It is probably not a coincidence that when the northerners picked their saint the choice fell on their first bishop, Bishop Gizurr's friend and contemporary, Jón Ögmundarson (1106-22).¹

III 1.1 *St Jón*

Brother Gunnlaugr Leifsson had several problems on his hands when faced with the task of writing a Life of St Jón. The main problem was that Jón's saintliness seems to have gone unnoticed until the late 1190s, more than 70 years after his death. This meant that Gunnlaugr had some convincing to do and also that very little had been recorded about St Jón and memories of him were rapidly becoming obscure. This is clearly reflected in *Jóns saga helga* as it comes to us. It appears that accounts of St Jón

¹ There was a pool to choose from, according to a contingent of Nordic saints who gave one Rannveig a guided tour of heaven all the dead bishops were saintly, but Jón and Þorlákr were most saintly and Ísleifr, Björn and Þorlákr Rúnólfsson came next - Bsk I, 454

available to Gunnlaugr were few. This is surprising considering that, although we do not know when Gunnlaugr was born, it is quite likely that he could have known somebody who remembered St Jón himself or somebody close to him.¹ Apart from a few miracles attributed to St Jón in his own lifetime,² Gunnlaugr could not come up with a single story or event concerning St Jón after he came to Hólar as bishop.

On St Jón's life before he became bishop we hear mostly about his exploits abroad. These stories contain the motif, very common in both sagas of Icelanders and hagiographic literature, where the hero goes abroad to be recognised by foreign kings and magnates. Royal acknowledgement of St Jón is ensured when a Norwegian queen foresees his becoming a bishop while he was still a child.³ Later he finds immediate favour with King Sveinn Úlfsson of Denmark and manages to soothe the anger of King Magnús Ólafsson of Norway against the Icelandic community in Niðarós (the modern town of Trondheim).⁴ St Jón stuns foreign audiences more than once with his exceptional singing voice,⁵ but his most outstanding achievement - the only one recognised in other sources⁶ - was when he tracked Sæmundr *fróði* down somewhere in Europe and brought him home.⁷ Remarkable exploits abroad are one of the surest ways to consolidate an Icelander's claim to fame and greatness,⁸ and, in this case, sainthood. Gunnlaugr made use of this in that nearly all he has to say of the 54 years of St Jón's life before he became bishop happens abroad. Gunnlaugr's efforts have not seemed enough though, because the story of St Jón's soothing of the anger of King Magnús has been shown to be an interpolation, probably by the translator.⁹

When St Jón comes to Hólar his saga changes greatly in character. Gunnlaugr can only give a general description of the 15 years of his episcopate. Excluding the miracles there are virtually no incidents or events to relate, not a breath on politics or St Jón's relations with the secular powers. Indeed the description is almost entirely confined to Hólar and in general terms to the diocese as far as it was affected by the church reforms St Jón is meant to have initiated. Although the factual value of Gunnlaugr's description is difficult to assess it is extremely interesting, both in what he chooses to describe and the general impression his description is meant to give.

¹ There is evidence for this in the B version where it says 'All the most respectable clergymen in the Northern quarter spent some time studying at Hólar [in the time of St Jón], those who our age, says brother Gunnlaugr, could remember. Many of [these] students died in our time.' [Allir hinir sæmiligstu kennimenn í Norðlendinga fjórðungi voru nokkra hríð til náms at Hólum, þá sem vorr aldr, segir bróðir Gunnlaugr, máttu muna, . Margir af . lærisveinum onduðust á vorum dögum] - Bsk I, 240

² 9 in version A, Bsk I, 169-75, 10 in version B, Bsk I, 242-49

³ Bsk I, 152 (217-18)

⁴ Bsk I, 154-57 (220-27)

⁵ Bsk I, 155 (220-21), 160 (232)

⁶ IA, 251

⁷ Bsk I, 156, 227-29

⁸ See Hill 1993

⁹ Louis-Jensen 1977 113-17 Cf. Sigurður Nordal in ÍF III, cxlvii-cliii

Gunnlaugr chose to emphasize two aspects of St Jón's episcopacy. The first is St Jón's commitment to education. Not only did he initiate a proper education of priests, he also brought to the school two foreign teachers, one of whom taught grammar and the other liturgical chant (i.e. *musica* and *versificatio*).¹ The B version gives a fuller account of the cathedral school and its students. Among them it mentions Ingunn, the young maiden who became so learned that she taught *grammaticam* and corrected Latin books which were read to her while she embroidered scenes of holy men.² The impression we are meant to get is further emphasised:

There was hardly a house [at Hólar] where some useful activity did not take place, the older taught the younger and the younger wrote [books, i.e. transcribed] between their lessons³

The other aspect Gunnlaugr emphasises even more were St Jón's efforts to improve Christian practice in his diocese and increase faith in God among his flock. Gunnlaugr tells us that at the Alþing in the first summer after St Jón returned to Iceland as bishop (i.e. 1107), he and Gizurr 'discussed many useful things, and decided with other learned men, what they should command their subordinates.'⁴ Unfortunately Gunnlaugr can give no details of these commands, which suggests that he did not know them and assumed, as is quite natural, that the bishops would have many things to discuss on St Jón's arrival as bishop.

According to Gunnlaugr, St Jón had not long been in office when he started to improve the *mores* of his flock. These modest reforms can be grouped in two. On the one hand he fought remnants of heathendom and other immoral habits, and on the other he sought to regulate the religious practice of his people. Belonging to the latter, Gunnlaugr lists a few of St Jón's directives which he says had been followed since.

- People should come to offices on feast days and other stipulated days.
- Priests should repeat often what the people should know. [B: Priests were to instruct their flocks in those things needed for salvation.]

Daily habits should be those fitting to Christians, namely:

- to pray at a church or cross at the beginning and end of each day.
- to have in one's room the symbol of the holy cross and
- on waking up cross one self and sing credo in deum and declare one's belief in God almighty
- never to go to sleep or eat or drink without crossing oneself beforehand.
- Everybody should know pater noster and credo in deum,
- and praise God seven times a day,

¹ Bsk I, 163-64 (235-36), 168 (239-40)

² Bsk I, 241

³ A version [Þá var þat ekki hús nálíga, at eigi væri nokkut iðnat í, þat er til nytsemdar var, þat var hinna eflri manna hattr, at kenna hinum ýngrum, en hinir yngri rituðu, þá er nams varð í milli] - Bsk I, 168, cf 240

⁴ A version [Marga lutu ræddu þeir sín á milli biskuparnir, þá er nytsamlígir voru, ok somdu til með öðrum læiðum monnum, hver bœð þeir skyldu bjóða sínum undirmonnum] - Bsk I, 162, cf 234

- and sing *credo in deum* and *pater noster* every night before falling asleep.¹

Some scholars have suggested that these are the directives agreed on by Gizurr and Jón at the Alþing of 1107.² The detailed form of this list suggests that Gunnlaugr bases it on some kind of written evidence. If that is true, that written evidence will have been known to others than Gunnlaugr, and he could hardly have omitted Gizurr's part if the document said that the two of them issued it. If the list is not based on any written evidence, it can best be interpreted as a summary of what Gunnlaugr considered to be good Christian practice and that he decided to attribute these directives to St Jón because he felt that the saint would have done the right thing in introducing them. Considering that St Jón was the first bishop of a new diocese, it seems quite natural that he would have begun his term in office by issuing directives on basic issues of this kind. Bishops issued such directives frequently, but there are no examples of the two Icelandic bishops issuing documents of this nature together. The question remains what relevance we are to attach to this list. Were these novel directives being issued for the first time or were they just a routine reiteration of generally accepted practices? If the former is true, as Gunnlaugr is claiming and most scholars have believed, this list is a major piece of evidence for the development of Icelandic Christianity and its state around 1100.

The main objection to that interpretation is that directives of this kind were being issued over and over again by much later bishops.³ The difference is that the later directives put little emphasis on personal observance and are much more concerned with church organisation and the practical details of the liturgy. That Gunnlaugr does not mention any such aspects of St Jón's administration is in itself a good indication of Gunnlaugr's ideals and how he wanted to depict his hero. The important point is, of course, that in any perfectly Christian population there are always those black sheep who forget to say their prayers and do not cross themselves before eating, not to mention other more serious sins. These people need constant reminding and guidance to better their ways, and that is what a good bishop should occupy himself with in Gunnlaugr's opinion. He no doubt knew and worried about many an errant soul and may have been critical of his own bishop's lack of concern for these matters. He at least states that as a result of St Jón's directives,

holy Christianity in the Northern quarter, had never, neither before nor since, flourished to the same extent as when the people were blessed with the government of this kind of bishop⁴

¹ Bsk I, 164-65, 236-37. Transl. based mainly on A.

² Magnús Stefánsson 1975: 65, Björn Þorsteinsson & Bergsteinn Jónsson 1991: 67.

³ Cf. similar commands in the Icelandic Book of Homilies from ca. 1200 (Íslensk hómilíubók, 163-65). The statues of Bishop Jón Sigurðsson of 26.7.1345 are a good example of directives on personal observance, DI II, 790-831.

⁴ [. . . at heilug kristni í Norðlendingafjórðungi hefir aldrei staðit með slíkum blóma, hvárki áðr né síðan, sem þá stóð, meðan fólkit var svá sælt, at þeir höfðu slíks biskups stjórn yfir sér] - Bsk I, 165; cf. 237.

Gunnlaugr wanted to depict St Jón as the good shepherd, a bishop whose primary concern was the salvation of his flock and the strengthening of Christianity in the spiritual sense. That is why he chose to relate exactly these directives and that is their relevance.

Gunnlaugr's St Jón was not only the good shepherd, he was also a champion in the fight against heathendom. According to Gunnlaugr he forbade all kinds of paganism, sacrifices and magic 'and fought against it with all his strength, because these [practices] had not been abolished completely while Christianity was young.' He also forbade all superstitions connected with the calendar and calling the weekdays after heathen gods. A game involving men and women reciting lewd poetry was also forbidden, but although St Jón tried he did not manage to uproot love poetry.¹ Among these achievements changing the names of the weekdays is the most remarkable. Icelandic is the only Germanic language which does not name any weekdays after heathen gods² and it is clear that by the late 12th century *Týsdagr* (Tuesday), *Óðinsdagr* (Wednesday) and *Þórsdagr* (Thursday) had been replaced by *þriðjudagr* (lit. third day), *miðvikudagr* (lit. mid-week day) and *fimmtudagr* (lit. fifth day). *Frjádagr* (Friday) remained an alternative to *föstudagr* (lit. fast day) until the 16th century when it disappeared. *Þriðjudagr* and *fimmtudagr* are translations of the terms favoured by the catholic church, i.e.. *Feria tertia* and *Feria quinta* respectively. *Miðvikudagr* on the other hand is clearly derived from the German *Mittwoch*.³ That implies German influence which is easier to connect with Ísleifr and Gizurr, the first two bishops of Skálholt, who had both studied in Germany.⁴ Changing the names of the weekdays may therefore have been a concern of other bishops than just St Jón. St Jón, himself a student of Ísleifr, was probably only continuing a campaign which must have taken a long time to have effect.⁵ The same is no doubt true of the other remnants of heathendom he is credited with having crushed. The rather general terms Gunnlaugr uses, suggest that he did not have a very clear idea of what these remnants of heathendom actually were. He may have been relying on some document originating from St Jón, similar to the chapter in *Grágás* banning heathen practices.⁶ But he may just as well have assumed, as is quite reasonable, that in St Jón's time there were still visible traces of heathendom to be found, and that St Jón fought against them, which is

¹ [ok reis í mótu því með öllu afli, ok því hafði eigi orðit af komit með öllu, meðan kristnin var úng] - Bsk I, 165 (237)

² Unless sun and moon are taken as gods

³ Árni Björnsson 1990: 71-74

⁴ Cf Magnús Már Lárusson 1967a. 358-59

⁵ The seemingly easy acceptance of the church's message on the names of the week days may have an explanation. It may be that the Germanic names were not that deeply rooted. They themselves were translations of the Roman names of the week days, dating from the early Viking age - Árni Björnsson 1990: 72-73. If the practice replaced by the Germanic names was not yet fully forgotten that may have made the bishops' task easier

⁶ Grg Ia, 22²²-23¹⁶

equally reasonable. That does not of course mean that some kind of definite victory over heathen practices was accomplished under St Jón. The only thing we know is that Gunnlaugr seems confident that there were no remnants of heathendom in his own time and that he had some notion that this had been a more serious problem for the earlier bishops.

Jóns saga helga has been dealt with here at some length mainly because Gunnlaugr's image of the past has tended to be accepted too readily by scholars, hungry for information on this period about which so little else is known. There is no reason to doubt that St Jón did found a cathedral school, that he did try to improve Christian practice in his diocese and that he did ban heathen practices. It is the relevance and importance of these facts which must be questioned.

While there was no doubt a core based on tradition which Gunnlaugr utilised, the aspects of St Jón's episcopacy which he chose to emphasise are probably those which best reflect his own views of what a model bishop should concern himself with. Gunnlaugr's idea of a model bishop was not of a belligerent reformer who carried his ideals through in spite, or against the advice of, his counterpart or other important people; a model applicable to his own bishop, Guðmundr góði. There is a clear message in the story that St Jón required the people of the region to come to Hólar at least once a year. As a result of this, almost 500 people massed on Hólar at major festivals, and although many brought their own provisions many had to rely on the see to be fed.¹ This story is mentioned in *Jóns saga* as an example of the responsibilities of St Jón's aides, but it is clearly also a memory of better days when the people of the diocese were eager to obey their bishop and flocked to him.

The parallel with the era of peace and splendour initiated by St Jón's contemporary Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson in Skálholt is clear and it is to the southern tradition we now turn

III 1.2 *Bishop Gizurr*

According to *Hungrvaka* Bishop Ísleifr (1056-80) did not have an easy time in office. 'He had much trouble in many ways in his office as bishop because of peoples' disobedience.' As an example the author says that the Lawspeaker had two wives, a mother and daughter (in succession), and that some men went on Viking raids, 'and did many other misdeeds, which would be thought to be outrageous, if they befell men now.' Ísleifr was also troubled by foreign missionary bishops who were much more lenient than him, but were favoured by evil men. We are also told that Ísleifr was hard

¹ Bsk I, 168 (239)

pressed financially.¹ The fact that Ísleifr did not have a reliable income, except his own inherited wealth, probably contributed to this view of his episcopacy. The author knew that tithes only began to be paid in Bishop Gizurr's time, and it was probably inconceivable to him how a bishop could execute his duties without a sound financial base. The gloom of this picture also fits the darkness of periods little or nothing is known about, and it also serves the purpose to enhance the brightness surrounding the person of Bishop Gizurr. The lenient missionary bishops possibly have some basis in reality since the Old Christian law section has a clause regulating acceptance of services from foreign bishops,² and the author of *Hungrvaka* may have based his account on this source. It seems that very little, if anything at all, was known about Ísleifr's episcopacy, and that the author was mainly attaching meaning to this lack of information, giving his account a dramatic effect by making Ísleifr's pioneering role look difficult.

In sharp contrast Bishop Gizurr (1082-1118)

gained rank and respect early in his episcopate, and every man wanted to do [sit and stand] as he ordered, both young and old, rich and poor, men and women, and it was right to say that he was both king and bishop of the country³ while he lived

His lasting achievements are then related with much praise: his gift of Skálholt to the see, his getting the tithe accepted and the establishment of the second see of Hólar. In this the author follows Ari's account closely. Following Gizurr's death in 1118, we are told of a series of bad weathers with freak accidents, followed by deprivation in many places.

The wisest men were of the opinion that Iceland withered after Gizurr's death as Rome after Pope Gregory's. And that Gizurr's death was a foreboding of all suffering in Iceland from bad times, both in shipwrecks and fatalities, and financial loss resulting therefrom, and thereafter turmoil and law breaking, and on top of that the highest mortality around the whole country since the country had been settled

To set things in their right perspective the author then adds that two years later Hafliði was injured at the Alþing, and that the case was not settled that summer.⁴

The message is clear; Gizurr's episcopacy was truly a golden age. On this the author of *Hungrvaka* rests on the authority of Ari, who, although not as vividly, also

¹ [Hann hafði nauð mikla á marga vegu í sínum byskupsdomi fyrir sakir óhlýðni manna - ok mörg endemi tóku menn þau til önnur, þau er nú mundi ódæmi þykkja ef menn hendi slíkt] - Bysp 1, 77-78
On the historicity of these claims see Einar Arnórsson 1944-48

² Grg 1a, 2210-20.

³ Cf. Adam of Bremen on the Icelanders and Bishop Ísleifr *Episcopum suum habent pro rege ...* Adam IV, 36, cf. Ármann Jakobsson 1994 33-35

⁴ [... tok tígn ok virðing svá mikla þegar snemmendis byskupsdoms síns, ok svá vildi hværr maðr sitja ok standa sem hann bauð, ungr ok gamall, sæll ok fátækr, konur ok karlar, ok var rétt at segja at hann væri bæði konungr ok byskup yfir landinu meðan hann lifði] - Bysp 1, 85, [Svá hugðisk at hinum vitrustum monnum, at svá þótti drúpa Ísland eptir fráfall Gizurar byskups sem Rómaborgarríki eptir fall Gregorí páfa. En fráfall Gizurar byskups bendi til ættar um oll óhöegindi á Íslandi af óáran, bæði í skipabrotum ok manntjóni ok fjárskaða er því fylgði, en eptir þat ófniðr ok logleysur, ok á þat ofan manndauði sá um allt landit at engi hafði slíkr orðið síðan [er] landit var byggt] - Bysp 1, 91

mentions how Gizurr was loved by his people and remarks that it was a great sign how obedient the people were in accepting the tithe.¹ And he, being a contemporary, would hardly have said that if there had been great resistance to it. The portents following Gizurr's death are not found in *Íslendingabók*, but we do know from other sources that there was a famine in 1120² and Haflíði's injury is the subject of *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*, also mentioned in the annals.³

To the author of *Hungrvaka* the peace ended with Gizurr's death and the period of trouble began, which he no doubt thought of as extending to his own days. He had good grounds for his interpretation. His knowledge of Gizurr's episcopacy probably did not extend far beyond what *Íslendingabók* has, and it is significant that Ari is, by his own terse standards, unusually laudatory of Gizurr. To the author, the peaceful acceptance of the tithe must have seemed, as it does to us, a remarkable achievement. He can only have interpreted it as conclusive evidence for Gizurr's authority and power and the peace and harmony which prevailed during his episcopate. To him it was no accident that almost immediately following Gizurr's death, dissension arose among the chieftains.

The author of *Hungrvaka* was not alone in his view of Gizurr's episcopate. Indeed this seems to have been the view of the past accepted by 13th-century historians. It is significant that the author of *Kristni saga* gives the same picture as *Hungrvaka*, painting it in even stronger colours. He follows *Íslendingabók* quite closely but also uses some of the material found in *Hungrvaka*.⁴ His account of Bishop Ísleifr is much shorter than *Hungrvaka*'s and contains only the most basic information, with no mention of Ísleifr's troubles.⁵ The description of Gizurr's episcopacy is much fuller, matching *Hungrvaka*'s description to a large degree, putting even more emphasis on the peace which prevailed under Bishop Gizurr and the abrupt change following his death. *Kristni saga* adds that 'Bishop Gizurr pacified the country so thoroughly, that no major conflicts occurred between chieftains, and the carrying of arms all but disappeared.'⁶ The author then goes on to give a list of chieftains who were ordained as priests by Bishop Gizurr, no doubt understanding that as further evidence of the state of grace the country was in. *Kristni saga* has the same portents as recorded in *Hungrvaka*, but gives somewhat more detail and adds a killing, also mentioned in the annals,⁷ to the list. Like the author of *Hungrvaka*, the author of *Kristni saga* ends with Þorgils's and Haflíði's

¹ ÍF I, 22

² IA, 19, 112, 320

³ IA, 19, 59, 112, 320

⁴ It is not clear whether the author of *Kristni saga* knew *Hungrvaka* or if he only had access to some of the material also used in *Hungrvaka*.

⁵ ASB XI, 45-46

⁶ [Gizurr biskup fndaði svá vel landit, at þa urðu engar stórdeilur með hqðingjum, en vápnaburð lagðiz mjök niðr] - ASB XI, 50

⁷ IA, 112, 320

dispute which he describes more fully. He also adds that at the Alþing when Þorgils injured Haflíði '... there was so little carrying of arms, that a single steel helmet was then at the Alþing, even though nearly every householder rode to the assembly ...'¹ The lack of arms is not the impression one gets from *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*, but it may be that the author was just a little clumsy here, intending this to apply to Gizurr's episcopacy in general although the context suggests otherwise. Anyway it is clear that the author of *Kristni saga* was even keener than the author of *Hungrvaka* to depict Gizurr's episcopate as a golden age, by drawing the reader's attention more forcefully to the contrast between it and his own unstable times when every other man was armed and householders no more bothered to come to the Alþing.

The dispute between Þorgils and Haflíði is the first unruliness known to us since the 1020s,² and if the annals are anything to go by that also seems to have been the state of knowledge in the 13th century. Many modern scholars have taken this quite literally to mean that no news is good news and that there was a period of peace and stability from the early 11th century up to 1120 when Þorgils cut off Haflíði's finger at the Alþing. The affair of Haflíði's finger is then seen as the beginning of the struggles between chieftains which came to characterise Icelandic history in the 12th and 13th centuries.³ As Gunnar Karlsson has pointed out, the nature of the sources available to us does not allow this interpretation.⁴ The main sources, *Íslendingabók*, *Jóns saga helga* and *Hungrvaka*, were all written by clergymen about their church, and they cannot be expected to have drawn attention to secular strife or troubles relating to the church which would have blackened its image. Neither does our understanding of Icelandic medieval society, or human nature in general, make almost a century of actual peace and stability seem very plausible. Yet it remains to be explained why other sources, particularly the annals, do not mention any unrest in this long period. The annals record struggles and killings not mentioned in any saga almost every other year in the 1120's and with increasing regularity after that.⁵ Why then this complete silence about the pre-1120 period?

¹ [var svá lítill vápnaburðr, at ein var stálhúfa þá á alþingi, ok reið drjúgum hverr bóndi til þings,] - ASB XI, 54

² Unless we take *Hungrvaka*'s account of the viking raids in Bishop Ísleifr's time seriously although it is in any case not clear whether these raids were supposed to be at home or abroad - Einar Arnórsson 1944-48 226-27. Ari says of Skaltu Þóroddsson who was Lawspeaker 1004-30 that in his days many chieftains and magnates were sentenced or made outlaws for killings or beatings because of his authority and government - ÍF I, 19. Some of the disputes dealt with in the sagas of Icelanders are also set in the middle of 11th century, for instance *Ljósvetninga saga* and *Bandamanna saga* - ÍF VII, 293-363, X, 3-121. The annals also mention strife in the 1020's but not after that until 1120, IA.

³ Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1953 229-30, Jón Jóhannesson 1956 271; Bjorn Þorsteinsson & Bergsteinn Jónsson 1991. 80-81

⁴ Gunnar Karlsson 1975 38

⁵ IA, esp 112-13, also 20, 59, 252, 320

One reason may be that Gizurr's period in office simply was a relatively peaceful period, compared to what went before and what came after. The memory of this relative peace then became idealised by the early 13th century, reinforced by Ari's great authority, and came to be linked with Gizurr's person in the minds of pious historians like the authors of *Hungrvaka* and *Kristni saga*. This in turn then affected the annal writers. As the earliest date known to us for the recording of contemporary events is 1131, it may also be that such recording had then only recently commenced and did not include recording of earlier events. These pre-1120 events were then, as a result, rapidly forgotten, making this idealised view more easily acceptable to people around 1200. All this is plausible enough but a more specific explanation centres on the affair of Hafliði's finger.

The affair of Hafliði's finger has always been treated as a major political event in Icelandic history, not only by modern scholars but also by 13th-century historians. The fact that a special saga was written about it, that this saga was included in the Sturlunga compilation and the comparative thoroughness with which the affair is described in the annals suggests the significance attached to this dispute by 13th-century Icelanders. Yet this dispute seems to have been far less dramatic or bloody than many in the latter half of the 12th century, not to mention the 13th. The dispute arose because of clashes between totally insignificant men who were dependants of the chieftains Þorgils and Hafliði. According to the saga neither chieftain did anything to settle these quarrels and both induced their dependants to step up the confrontations. In the end each chieftain had a killed dependant on his hands and each took his case to the Alþing of 1120. There neither would budge an inch and in a throng where Hafliði had first tried to dissolve Þorgils's court proceedings and then was urged to state his conditions for settlement, he raised his axe against Þorgils, but the latter managed to be first and cut off Hafliði's finger. Hafliði then had Þorgils sentenced to greater outlawry (virtual death sentence with confiscation of all property). Þorgils nevertheless went home and aided by his large following managed to stave off Hafliði's attempts to confiscate his property. In the following summer both rode to the Alþing in great numbers and a bloody showdown was only averted at the last minute, after the mediation of Bishop Þorlákr and Ketull Þorsteinsson, the bishop in waiting. Þorgils agreed to let Hafliði decide the terms of settlement, and paid the fine in full although it was outrageously high. Both honoured the settlement we are then told and remained on the same side in conflicts while they lived.¹

The author of the saga puts the emphasis on the pride and stubbornness of the chieftains but the political significance of this affair seems to have been that the chieftains could not or did not want to settle the trivial matters of their dependants

¹ Sturl. 7-46

peacefully, that they came close to killing each other at the Alþing, that a chieftain was sentenced and that both threatened to use force on a large scale even if it meant breaking the law and violating the sanctity of the Alþing. The hypothesis will be suggested here that the affair of Haflíði's finger was a political watershed, where the political struggle took on new dimensions:¹ That the strength and organisation of the chieftains had been gradually building up since the period of settlement and that the affair of Haflíði's finger was the first sign of the chieftains having gained enough power to attempt to side-step accepted procedures and use force to further their objectives. Þorgils and Haflíði did not manage to break each other, but the attempt had been made. They had shown that chieftains were capable of mustering hundreds of men to fight for a cause which was no immediate concern of these men, and thereby they showed that chieftains had the will and the means to crush each other by force, with little or no regard for the law or the established order. If, as is suggested here, these were totally new concepts, it makes it easier to understand why so much was made of this affair and why memories of earlier conflicts were not preserved. With the emergence of these new concepts, the political parameters changed and the context of earlier conflicts will soon have become both incomprehensible and insignificant in comparison to the new political reality. As a result the earlier conflicts, although no doubt highly significant in their day, soon began to seem to have been of little consequence and were therefore not recorded.

The usefulness of this hypothesis lies not only in that it explains why the pre-1120 period is so consistently seen as a golden age. It also allows us to imagine a much weaker authority of chieftains in the 10th and 11th centuries than hitherto believed, which in turn makes the development of the chieftains' power into the 12th century easier to understand. That is, a gradual development from weak power in a weak economy rather than a disintegration of a stable and strong system of government.

¹ Cf. Breisch 1994: 149-58

III 2. The tithe law of 1097¹

Because of the affection [Bishop Gizurr] was held in, and because of his and Sæmundr's exhortations, with the counsel of Markús the Lawspeaker, it was made law that all men calculated and valued their property, and swore that it was correctly valued, whether it was in land or moneys, and then paid tithe on it. It is a great sign, how obedient the countrymen were to that man, that he brought about a valuation on oaths, of all the property that was in Iceland, and of the land itself so that tithe was paid on it and a law passed that so it should remain as long as Iceland was settled.²

This is Ari *fróði*'s description of the passing of the tithe law in 1097.³ Writing in 1122x33 he was no doubt justified in becoming excited (and this is about as excited as he gets) about Bishop Gizurr's achievement. At that time tithe was only about to be introduced in Norway and Denmark, and in Norway at least it is generally not believed to have been fully accepted until the 1150s.⁴ In Denmark it had been accepted by 1135⁵ but most Danish scholars believe it had been introduced shortly after 1100 as a result of the establishment of the archdiocese of Lund, although recently arguments have been put forward that the tithe was not pushed through until around 1120.⁶ The Danish tithe was however at first only divided between the church and the priest and it was not until

¹ Jón Johannesson 1956: 204-209, Magnús Már Lárusson 1967a: 359-61, Skovgaard-Petersen 1960: 263-70, Magnús Stefánsson 1974, 1975: 60-62, 86-91.

² [Al ástsælið hans ok al tölum þeira Sæmundar með umbráði Markúss lögsgogumanns vas þat í lög leitt, at allir menn tölðu ok virðu allt fé sitt ok soru, at rett vrit væri, hvárt sem vas í lögnum eða í lausaaurum, ok gørdú tíund af síðan. Þat eru miklar jarategnir, hvat hlýðnir landsmenn váru þeim manni es hann kom því fram, at te allt vas vrit með svardögum, þat es á Íslandi vas, ok landit sjalfit ok tíundir af gørvor ok lög a lögð, at svá skyldi vesu, meðan Ísland es byggt.] - ÍF I, 22.

³ IA, 19, 59, 110, 251, 319. In the 14th century manuscript of the Old Christian law section, *Belgsdalsbók*, there is an introduction to the Tithe law, found in no other manuscript, where this event is dated to 1096: "When MXCVJ winters had passed from the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the 16th year of the episcopacy of honourable lord Gizurr bishop of Skálholt, this tithe making was proclaimed as law over the whole of Iceland by both clergy and lay people as follows: ' [Þa er liðit var fra hingatburð vass herra iesu kristi vi xc ok vj vætr a sextanda ar byskopsdoms virðuhgs herra Gizurar skalahollz byskops var þesse tíundar gerð logtekri jfir allt Ísland bæði af lærðum monnum ok leiktolki sem her lýlgir] - Grg III, 134₂₋₆. Although many scholars have chosen to follow this source on the dating of the Tithe law instead of the annals, it is difficult to see why it should be preferred, especially as Gizurr's 16th year as bishop was not in 1096 but from 4 September 1097 to 4 September 1098, according to which the Tithe law would have been passed at the Alþing (held in July) 1098. Following Jón Jóhannesson 1956: 178 In 1, the year 1097 will be preferred here.

⁴ According to *Heimskringla* King Sigurðr *Jórsalafari* (d. 1130) vowed to introduce tithe in Norway when King Baldwin of Jerusalem gave him a piece of the Holy Cross in 1110 - ÍF XXVIII, 250, but although the saga claims he fulfilled his vow (ÍF XXVIII, 257) this is not supported by other sources. In a 14th century manuscript a Simun who was bishop of Niðarós before the establishment of the archbishopric in 1152x3 is credited with having introduced the tithe - DI III, 25. Simun was still bishop in 1139 - Kolsrud 1913a: 199. The earliest definite evidence for the tithe in Norway are King Magnus Erlingsson's privileges to the Norwegian church from 1163x70 - Lat.dok, 63. Kolsrud 1929, Helle 1964: 41, 167, Hamre 1974: 281.

⁵ DD II, 127.

⁶ Dahlerup 1974: 291, Brengaard 1982: 147-48.

the late 12th century that Danish bishops got their full third of the tithe.¹ In Sweden there is no evidence for the introduction of tithe until the late 12th century.²

In Denmark St Knud had made an attempt to introduce tithe in his kingdom in the 1080's, and this seems to have been one of the main causes for the rebellion against him which resulted in his killing in 1086.³ Apart from that very little is heard about the introduction of tithe or reactions to it in Scandinavia. In Norway and Denmark the relatively lengthy period between the first attempts to have the tithe introduced and its full acceptance, suggests that there was considerable opposition to it. That is of course what we would expect; in none of the Scandinavian countries was there a tradition for regular taxation⁴, nor was royal authority and administration developed enough for the kings to be able to force the acceptance of tithe in the face of opposition.⁵ In Iceland conditions were apparently even less favourable; there was no tradition for any sort of taxation whatsoever and no central authority which could impose taxation on the populace and organise its collection.

It stands out clearly in Ari's description of the introduction of the Tithe law, that he considered it to be a major achievement and the finest witness to Bishop Gizurr's statesmanship. His words are usually interpreted as the tithe having met little or no serious resistance and having at least been fully accepted by the time he wrote his account.⁶ That is reasonable enough; had there been serious opposition to the tithe, Ari could hardly have written so gleefully about the countrymen's obedience to Bishop Gizurr, although it is of course not impossible that he was simplifying matters somewhat. There is however no need to be suspicious; as all scholars who have written on this subject agree, it is easily understandable why the Tithe law was introduced in Iceland without opposition.⁷ Half of the tithe was payable to the church-owners and all churches were privately owned. It is reasonable to assume that the church-owners were among the richest and most powerful in society, i.e. those who controlled legislation at the Alþing. It was clearly to their advantage to let such a law be passed.

¹ Dahlerup 1974 291-2, Skyum-Nielsen 1971 24-25, 188-92, Koch 1972 II, 121f. In Scania disaffection with the newly introduced bishop's tithe was one of the grievances expressed in the revolt of 1180-82 - Holm 1988

² Schuck 1974 295, Nylander 1953 205-206

³ Breengaard 1982 122-49, Wåhlin 1988

⁴ It was only in the 12th century that the Scandinavian kings began to exact taxes annually - before that people's contribution to society took the form of manning or furnishing war parties. On *leidang* see Bolin 1934, Christensen 1965 and Ekbohm 1979 for Denmark, for Norway Bull 1920, Bjørkvik 1965 and for Sweden Halstrom 1949a, 1965

⁵ On the development of royal authority in the Scandinavian countries see Bagge 1975, 1986a, 1986b, 1989b, Christensen 1968, Gunnes 1976a, Helle 1964 esp. 160-65, 1981, Jørgensen 1987, Koch 1969, Lonnroth 1940, 1966, 1982

⁶ Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1953 205-206, Jón Jóhannesson 1956 178, Magnús Stefánsson 1975 60

⁷ E.g. Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1953 205-206, Jón Jóhannesson 1956 178, Magnús Stefánsson 1974 287, Gunnar Karlsson 1975 38, Magnús Stefánsson 1975 60, 86-87, Jon Viðar Sigurðsson 1989 96, Bjorn Þorsteinsson & Bergsteinn Jonsson 1991 65

There are problems with this reasoning however. On the one hand it only explains why the Tithe law could be introduced, it does not explain how or to what extent it was possible to enforce it. It is easy to understand why those who received the tithe were in favour of it, but that does not get us any closer to understanding why those who actually had to pay should have done so without a murmur. On the other hand this reasoning is a far too simplistic treatment of the Tithe law and its introduction. While it emphasises the advantages of the tithe to chieftains and rich householders and the implications of that for power consolidation in the 12th century it does not recognise the effect of the Tithe law on those who had to pay it; did they see it as a welcome rationalisation of payments for essential services or as an unreasonable burden? Neither does this reasoning account for the implications of half the tithe; the bishop's quarter and the quarter which was ascribed to the maintenance of the poor.

III 2.1. *The Tithe law: A revaluation*

The Icelandic tithe was unique in that it was a 1 % property tax, the rationale being that as standard interest was 10 %, 1 % of property would equal 10 % of potential yields. As this was clearly usury, as the Norwegian envoy Loðinn *leppr* pointed out in 1281,¹ this has sometimes been interpreted as evidence for the Icelanders' independent turn of mind and their lack of respect for canon law, but it is more directly ascribed to the fact that there was little choice; Iceland's was not an agrarian economy and calculating yields from animal husbandry and hunting is impossibly complicated.

It is not known how the tithe was divided when it was first introduced *Hungrvaka* claims that the fourfold division (church, priest, bishop and the poor) was original,² but it is unlikely that the author knew this for a fact. Ari does not mention how the tithe was divided, and the Tithe law, in the form it is preserved from around 1200, cannot be taken as a source for the original division. In case changes had been made on the tithe system we cannot expect to see traces of an earlier system in the legal

¹ „But where you spoke of usury I believe it is truly evil, and those who are usurers should be excommunicated, but what is more clearly usury than the wrongful tithe reckoning which is in this country. You bishops claim tithe of buckles and silver-girdles, buckets and bushels and other dead objects, and it amazes me that the populace tolerates such wrong from you, that you do not take Nordic tithe as is practised in the whole world, and is the only right and legislated [tithe]“ [Enn þar sem þeir töludud umm okur truce eg sannlega að það se jllt, og þeir sem okur karlar eru sieu bansetter, enn hvad ma hærra okur vera enn tyudar giðrd su hin ranglega sem hier er a landenu. Þier biskoparner heymtud tyund at sylgrium og siltur belltum, koppum og kerðlldum og audru daudu fie, og undra eg miðg hví lands buid þolir ydur slykar ohæfur, og giðred ei norræna tyund að eins þa sem geingur umm allann heimenn, og einsamann er nu rett og lögtekennt]- ÁB, 81. Bishop Ari, in reply claimed that 'from the words of Pope Innocent we know that this tithe reckoning is not usury and is no danger to anyone's soul' [Af orðum Innoçenti þafa vitum vier að su tyundar giord er ei okur og vinnur aungvum manne saluon.] ÁB, 81. Which Innocent Ári was referring to is not known nor whether this means that the pope's sanction had been sought or whether Bishop Ári was interpreting some decree or other

² Bysp I 86

material. Although there is no reason to expect that any such change took place, and we must therefore assume that the fourfold division was original, it is necessary to keep in mind that the sources for the division of the tithe and for regulations regarding its calculation and payment post-date the introduction of the tithe by more than a century.

The Tithe law is preserved as a special section in *Grágás*. In the *Konungsbók* version it comes at the end of the collection,¹ but in the *Staðarhólsbók* version it has been added to the Christian law section at the beginning of the collection² and the two are also found together in several 14th century manuscripts. Formerly it was believed that the Tithe law was committed to writing already when it was passed in 1097 and as a consequence the preserved texts were thought to represent the most ancient Icelandic writing³ As most modern scholars recognise, there are no grounds for believing that the preserved texts represent the original legislation even if there may have been a written record of it at the time.⁴

The view that the Tithe law must have been written down when it was passed is based on the assumption that as the Tithe law can be seen as a church law it is reasonable to think it was committed to writing because that was what church people did. This is however making unnecessary assumptions about the levels of literacy in Iceland in the 1090s and about contemporary perceptions of the difference between the secular and ecclesiastical spheres. It is perfectly possible that the Tithe law was written down in 1097 but there is no particular evidence which points in that direction. In fact the available evidence suggests a much slower development of written legislation regarding the tithe.

Jón Jóhannesson pointed out that there are in the Old Christian law section regulations regarding tithe payments and he argued that it would have been unnecessary to write them into that section if a separate Tithe law had already existed in writing in 1122x33.⁵

The regulations found in the Old Christian law section are not extensive but they do cover issues such as to which church tithes are to be paid; the bishop's duty to divide the land into tithe areas and the date, place and tender of the payment of the priest's, church and bishop's quarters⁶ While it is clear in the Old Christian law section that the tithe was divided in four, the paupers' quarter is not mentioned at all. Neither are there any rules on the procedure for assessing taxable property, scrutiny of accounts or the

¹ Grg 1b, 205-14

² Grg II, 46-57

³ Alongside the Treaty between the Icelanders and St Olaf confirmed by Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson in 1082x1118 (Grg 1b, 195-97. On the treaty see Bjorn Sigfusson 1964, Jon Jóhannesson 1956: 134-42, Páll Sigurðsson 1967, Sigurður Línvald 1974a: 221-22). In this spirit the Tithe law manuscripts were printed in DI under the year 1096, DI I, 70-162.

⁴ Magnus Stefansson 1974: 287, 1975: 60, Jonas Kristjánsson 1975: 212.

⁵ Jón Jóhannesson 1956: 204.

⁶ Grg 1a, 14|2-15, 1922-20|2.

process for litigation in case of intentionally low assessments. These issues are dealt with at length in the separate Tithe law section and the simplest explanation is to see the provisions in the Old Christian law section as an earlier stage of the legislation while the more detailed provisions in the separate Tithe law section represent a more recent refinement.

It is then likely that the clauses on the tithe in the Old Christian law section represent the earliest codification of rules relating to the tithe, or at least an earlier stage in the codification than the separate Tithe law. They were clearly not meant to be a full treatment of the tithe system and only cover it in so far as it had a direct bearing on the affairs of the church. As shall be discussed in more detail below, supervision of property assessments was not in the hands of the church but the commune, as was the distribution of the paupers' quarter. This affects our appreciation of the Tithe law as it suggests that secular and non-religious interests were just as influential in its acceptance and it may suggest that the church was not necessarily the influential body by 1100 as it is sometimes made out to be.

There is no particular reason to think that the Tithe law was written down when first accepted in 1097, and much less reason to think that it was already then the comprehensive piece of legislation we know from the 13th century manuscripts. If this view be accepted it changes considerably our evaluation of the effects of the tithe on Icelandic society.

In Icelandic historiography the passing of the Tithe law is normally taken to indicate the close of the formative period of the Icelandic church organisation and the beginnings of an established order. It will be argued here that this is a misleading and unfounded view and that, as elsewhere, the introduction of the tithe represented one of the first steps towards any kind of established order.

Íslendingabók is largely responsible for this perception of the tithe. Ending as it does in 1120, it describes a development which ends in established order and this has affected the views of all later onlookers. The authors of *Hungrvaka* and *Kristni saga* add to this feeling by emphasising the achievements of Bishop Gizurr and by indicating that permanence in the church organisation had set in by the end of his episcopacy. These medieval views of the past coupled with the first fruits of ecclesiastical activity—the emergence of writing in the vernacular and the beginnings of clerical education in the schools at Skálholt and Haukadalur in the late 11th century and in those at Hólar and Oddi in the early 12th century, have combined to produce an idea of an established church which had already gone through its formative stages by the 1120s.¹ To take but

¹ Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1953 184-228, Jon Jóhannesson 1956 167-212, esp 201, see also Sigurður Línal 1974b 270-71 and Bjorn Þorsteinsson & Bergsteinn Jonsson 1991 63-81. Magnús Stefánsson 1975 57-60 seems to be of the other opinion that the church only really began to develop as a result of the changes that were taking place in the early 12th century.

one recent example, Helgi Þorláksson in his study of the power of the Oddaverjar, has suggested that the parish of the church at Oddi was unusually large in the late 13th century, because Sæmundr *fróði* (d. 1133) had been in a position to secure his church a large tithe area.¹ This presupposes an episcopal structure which following the Tithe law of 1097 governed the division of the country into tithe areas.² It has been suggested that the counting of *þingfararkaupsbændr* attributed to Bishop Gizurr by Ari³ was in preparation for this task.⁴ Ari however puts the counting in the context of preparations for the establishment of the second see at Hólar and it is difficult to see why he should have chosen to be unclear on this point.

A school of thought within the debate about the reasons behind the writing of *Landnámabók* holds that Bishop Gizurr commissioned Ari the priest to compile information on the farmsteads where churches stood and that the original *Landnámabók* was the fruit of that labour although later revisions changed its contents.⁵ This information is then supposed to have been used to divide the country into tithe areas. Arguments have not been forthcoming on how the kind of information preserved in *Landnámabók* could in practice have facilitated such a division.

All this is based on doubtful premises. Firstly it is assumed that valuation of all land and property in the country could only be done with a standardised value-reckoning and that this could only be developed by the bishops. This is an unnecessary assumption; it is for the first part inconceivable that some kind of system for valuing property did not exist already. A farming society which does not have the means to estimate the value of land and livestock is difficult to imagine; how could property otherwise be bought, sold or divided fairly between heirs? For the second part there was neither need for, nor the bureaucratic means to provide, a standardised system of value-reckoning. The assessments were conducted by each commune and the different quarters of the tithe were paid on that basis. The assessments may very well have been based on slightly different premises in different regions but it is not possible to show

¹ Helgi Þorláksson 1989a 83. There are in fact no sources for the size of the tithe area of Oddi from medieval times, but it is clear from the absence of serviced churches in the vicinity of Oddi and early modern sources that its tithe area must have been quite large. In 1847 there were 24 *logbýli* in the parish of Oddi, and although that is a large parish it is not exceptionally large, and the neighbouring parish of Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð was equally large - JJ, 49, 51. Also Sveinn Víkingur 1970: 209.

² This also presupposes that there were equally many serviced churches in the area at that time as later - if they were not as many Sæmundr would not have had to use his position to secure a large tithe area, it would have been large anyway. There are of course no indications on the number of churches in the vicinity of Oddi in the early 12th century and it is just as likely that the size of the tithe area of Oddi is due to its seniority among the churches of the region.

³ ÍFI, 23.

⁴ Bjorn M. Olsen 1915 349-50.

⁵ Halldor Hermannsson 1948 22-27, Arnór Sigurjónsson 1970, 1976, Einar G. Petursson 1986. This is a minority view. The traditional "Quest for knowledge" view is represented by Jón Jóhannesson 1941, 1954 and the "Conspiracy of the landowners" view by Barði Guðmundsson 1938 and Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1974. See Jakob Benediktsson in ÍFI, cxviii-cxix, 1969b, 283-90, 1974b for a more relaxed treatment. Also Orri Vésteinnsson 1994 633-35.

that the bishops were in any position to realise that, or if they did, in any position to impose a system of value-reckoning of their own devising. The Tithe law does not foresee that the basis of the assessments could be a problem, which suggests that the householders of each commune trusted themselves and their appointed officers to place value on their property.

The second doubtful interpretation of the Tithe law is that the bishops were being ordered to divide the country into tithe areas, and that they were being given the right to organise things on a country-wide scale. This is based on clauses in the Old Christian law section and the Tithe law where it is decreed that the bishop shall decide to which church each individual is to pay his tithe and that the bishops shall divide the districts so that the inhabitants of each farmstead pay their tithes to a particular church.¹ As it is, these clauses, like the rest of *Grágás*, are not general guidelines for government but solutions for individuals concerning particular issues. They refer only to whose right it is to take these kinds of decisions when they needed to be taken, e.g. when church-owners disagreed about their tithe-areas.

Executive power did not exist in Iceland prior to 1262-64, nor were there any kind of impersonal structures which could take unilateral decisions which were legally binding on others. In the eyes of the law the church was not a legal person; it existed only as individuals with certain qualifications. Its existence could be expressed only as the duties invested in certain individuals on account of their ordination and as the rules governing their interrelationship (i.e. bishop-priest, priest-deacon etc.) and their relationship with laymen. In the law text the idea that it is everybody's duty to pay tithe is not expressed, rather the emphasis is on everybody's duty to have their property valued.² It is then up to the individuals who received parts of the tithe to call for their share. The legal plaintiffs were the pauper or an officer of the commune for the paupers' quarter, the bishop or his appointed representative in the commune for the bishop's quarter and the church-owner for the church and priest's quarters or - in case he showed no interest - the priest who served the church 'if he will use the moneys for the benefit of the church.'³ In cases of wrongful oaths on property the plaintiff was any other member of the commune.⁴

¹ [Þangat skal leggja hværr logtvind sína halla, til þeirrar kirkio sem byskop qveþr at - oe skal byskop skipta því herapi til þes - at at hværingi bœ til hværrar kirkio - hværr skal gjalda tuund sína - hværgi er a landi byr] - Grg 1a, 14. [hall tuund hværs manz þat skal leggja til kirkna oe til presta reiðo sua til huærrar kirkio sem byscop seipar tuundom til] - Grg 1b, 210, and [Byscop skal raða til hværrar kirkio skal leggja tuund af hværom bœ] and the following sentences Grg 1b 214

² As the opening sentence of the Tithe law 'It is spoken in laws here that all men in this country shall proclaim a legal tithe of their property' [Þat er mælt ilogom her at menn scio tuunda te sitt allir a lande her logtuund] Grg 1b 205

³ Grg 1a, 151 2, 1927-202, Grg 1b 20816-19, 20920 23, [sa er til kirkio þurpar vill teet hala] Grg 1b, 210 18 23

⁴ Grg 1b, 20723-25

There was therefore no single body which oversaw tithe-payments; it was up to the commune and its officers to supervise the assessments, but once the paupers' quarter had been paid the commune had no further responsibility. The bishops were not given any right to intervene in cases of non-payment of the paupers', priest's or church quarters¹ nor had the priests any influence in matters of the tithe except in the unlikely event that a church-owner neglected to call for his half of the tithe. The only influence the bishops had was in deciding to which churches half the tithe was paid and they could also direct the 'undivided tithe' or tithe which amounted to less than one ounce unit and was normally given whole to the paupers, to churches.² These were of course considerable powers but they did not allow the bishops any more influence over tithe-payments. It is also well to remember that the law texts being cited here post-date the original legislation by more than a century and as episcopal authority and power were on the increase in the 12th century they reflect what the bishops had achieved, amongst other things on the strength of the tithe, since 1097.

On the basis of this revaluation of the Tithe law the following can be argued:

- Although the tithe is a Christian idea and its acceptance in Iceland in 1097 is therefore testimony to the influence of the Church and the extent to which its teachings had affected society, the limited influence the Church is given over its reckoning and distribution shows that as an institution it was still in its infancy.
- That said, comparison with Denmark, where the bishop's share in the tithe was accepted much later than the other parts and only after resistance, suggests that in Iceland the position of the bishops was relatively strong.
- The fact that the property assessments were in the hands of the commune which also distributed the paupers' quarter, leads to the suggestion, expanded below, that secular interest in reforming poor relief was an important factor in the acceptance of the law in 1097.
- The laws of *Grágás* are not normative and the Tithe law cannot be interpreted as a directive to divide the country into tithe areas. It should rather be interpreted as a warrant for certain individuals to claim their share of the tithe. The law provides the legal procedure for such claims but realising a claim was up to the claimant like all other litigation in Icelandic society, and his success depended on his political skill and influence

¹ The bishops did have a right to appoint a plaintiff in cases of over-leeding or under-leeding of invalids and could rightfully be asked to arbitrate in such cases - Grg 1b 178-79, but it is not clear whether this could include calling for a pauper's tithe. See below ch. III 23 on the distinction between paupers and invalids

² Grg 1b, 214-79. The regulations found in the manuscript AM 315 fol Litr B allowing the bishops to direct the whole paupers' quarter to churches - Grg 1b, 228, are probably more recent (13th or 14th century) as all the clauses on this single piece of vellum seem to be amendments - Grg III xlii-xliii

- It is therefore wrong to assume that the Tithe law was immediately followed by a country-wide demarcation of tithe area-boundaries. It may have resulted in the defining of boundaries between tithe-areas in some regions but there is reason to expect that in others, churches with permanent ministries attached were still few and far between and that their owners were not able to extract tithe from people who lived far afield and did not attend the church regularly or at all.

III 2.2. Church economics before the tithe

As discussed above most scholars have assumed that the Tithe law was passed towards the end of the formative period of the Icelandic church organisation. This would be argued by pointing out that there would hardly have been a need for such legislation if there were not plenty of churches and priests to benefit from it. In order to support this idea scholars have looked for other sources of income which could account for all these early churches and the priests who served them.

Unlike Norwegian scholarship which holds that a 'capital tithe' (Nor. *höfuðtíund*, Lat. *decima capitales*, a large offering payable once in a lifetime), preceded the ordinary, annual tithe,¹ there is agreement that the corresponding Icelandic 'greater tithe' (*tíund in meiri*) was a secondary introduction.² Nor has anyone suggested that the Tithe law of 1097 was only a rubber-stamp on already accepted practice. Instead a precursor to the tithe has been identified; Bjorn Þorsteinsson and Jón Jóhannesson believed that temple dues had been exacted in heathen times and that this had been changed into some kind of church dues after the conversion.³ The idea of temple dues is only found in 13th and 14th century sources and is almost certainly fiction,⁴ although some modern scholars still seem to believe in them.⁵

Ísleifs þátr mentions that while tithes did not exist in Bishop Ísleifr's time (1056-80), dues were paid to him from all around the country,⁶ whereas *Hungrvaka* stresses the financial troubles of Bishop Ísleifr because 'the income was small but the expenses great'.⁷ It is unlikely that either author had much in the way of concrete

¹ Maurer 1874c: 16-51, Hamre 1974: 280-81

² Vilhjálmur Finsen in Grg III s v: *tíund*, Magnús Stefánsson 1974: 290-91, cf. Maurer 1874c: 4-16 who was of the other opinion

³ Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1953: 200, 1978: 74; Jón Jóhannesson 1956: 202

⁴ Olsen 1966: 43-48, Jakob Benediktsson 1974a: 172-173, 1975. Temple dues are mentioned in *Landnámabók* (H) - ÍF I, 315 (as in *Þorðar saga hreðu* - IF XIV, 231 and *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts* - IF XIII, 343), *Kristni saga* - ASB XI, 10 (as in *Þátr af Þorvaldi víðforla* - ASB XI, 72 as in OST I, 291), *Eyrbyggja saga* - IF IV, 9-17, *Egils saga* - ÍF II, 293, *Vopnfirðinga saga* - ÍF XI, 33, *Þorskfirðinga saga* - IF XIII, 193 and *Kjalnesinga saga* - IF XIV, 7

⁵ Byock 1990: 83

⁶ [tíundir voru þá öngar en tollar voru þá til lagdir um land allt] - Bysp I, 23

⁷ [váru tillögð hlut en atsókn mikil] - Bysp I, 78

evidence regarding the finances of Bishop Ísleifr. As discussed in ch. III 1.2 the author of *Hungrvaka* seems to exaggerate Bishop Ísleifr's financial and pastoral difficulties in order to emphasise Bishop Gizurr's brilliance. *Ísleifs þáttur* is a more recent source (mid or late 13th century, see ch. II 2.1) and it is likely that its author simply could not imagine an episcopal see without some sort of income. That is of course consistent with the tendency among saga authors to envisage structural arrangements in the pre-Christian past as essentially the same as in their present.¹

It is safe to dismiss temple dues as well as any sort of levies for Ísleifr's bishopric. Although few set much store by such ideas nowadays earlier scholarship built elaborate constructions on these grounds, which still influence current views, even if the basic evidence has been refuted. In particular this applies to views on the nature of the power of the chieftains, the *goðar*, and to some extent pre-Christian social organisation and the origins of territorial divisions.

Many scholars still have no scruples in attributing religious functions to Viking age chieftains,² and such ideas still influence current thought on the origins and nature of power in medieval Scandinavia. This issue will be discussed in more detail in ch. IV 1 where it is argued that there are neither sources nor reasons to attribute religious functions to pre-Christian chieftains or to suppose that they presided over any sort of communal gatherings. There is no need to look any further than the Sagas of Icelanders and contemporary sagas for indications about the nature of the power of the *goðar*,³ and in no way do these sources suggest that the *goðar*'s power had a base in communal responsibilities. On the contrary it is evident that the *goðar* had particular difficulty in translating their powers as leaders of men into lordships over territories and that this was only happening from the 12th century onwards.

This is an important consideration for the present inquiry because the extent of religious involvement of the chieftains in the 11th century greatly affects our estimates of the development of religious institutions before the introduction of the tithe. Here it will be maintained that in the beginning of the 11th century the chieftains had no sort of territorial powers and were not regarded by their neighbours as having any religious responsibilities. It is however likely that the chieftains were already then aspiring to more consolidated powers and strove to increase their authority and influence by building churches and paying for priests to give services.

¹ 'Each man was to give dues to a temple, as they now give tithe to a church' [Hverr maðr skyldi gefa toll til hots sem nú til kirkju tíund] - IF I, 315, 'At one end of the temple there was a chamber in the same manner as there are now cancels in churches' [Innar af hofinu var hús í þá líking, sem nú er songhús í kirkjum,] [F IV, 8 On this see Olsen 1966 25-34, 111-12.

² Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1985, Munch 1991 328 Graslund 1992 132 The majority of scholars writing since 1970 do however refrain from discussing the matter at all

³ Sørensen 1977, 1992b, 1993, Miller 1990

The missionary bishops, at least those like Hróðólfr in Borgarfjörður and Bjarnharðr in Húnaþing who stayed for considerable periods of time, must have found patrons to support them in their task. It is reasonable to assume that effective patronage could only be provided by chieftains or wealthy farmers of influence. Itinerant priests like the good Reginpreht, whether they were trading or preaching or both, were probably also in need of the patronage of chieftains¹ In Iceland there were no bases independent of the indigenous society from which the missionaries could operate, like the monasteries from which much of central and eastern Europe was christianised. Nor was there any royal authority which could sustain and protect the missionaries as there was in the Scandinavian kingdoms.

It is therefore difficult to imagine how the earliest missionaries could have even travelled to Iceland, let alone stayed there for protracted periods of time, without the active support and involvement of those who exercised authority and had command over enough resources to maintain them.

Without going any further into the realms of speculation we can surmise that the first missionaries were to all intents and purposes entirely dependent on chieftains for support and protection, as well as for the building of churches and procurement of wine and other materials needed. The material requirements of the missionaries may not have been great but there are certain things which a Christian ministry cannot be without in the long run, especially after the first phase when nominal conversion has been achieved and the building of organised Christian life has begun

It is reasonable to imagine that there was a slow increase in the number of clergy in Iceland from the 1020s onwards as a result of the labours of the missionaries. It is of course also possible that there were more foreign priests of Reginpreht's ilk although we have no way of assessing that. 11th century priests fall into two distinct groups: on the one hand there are the Icelanders of aristocratic birth like Sæmundr *fróði* and St Jón who owned their own estates, and on the other itinerant priests who had no landed property on which they could base their income. There is no direct evidence for the existence of the latter class of priests, it is postulated here because it is difficult to see how the mission could have been achieved without any foot soldiers and because it is unlikely that all chieftains could be bothered to become priests themselves. We cannot of course know how numerous or influential such itinerant priests were, it does not seem that they were important for the later developments.

Like the missionaries it is difficult to see how itinerant priests could survive and operate without the active support of the chieftains. Procuring the basic necessities of life was one problem which faced such priests, but a larger problem was no doubt that, judging from attitudes in *Grágás*, people with uncertain income or people who based

¹ See Helgi Þorláksson 1991b: 153-77 for the importance chieftains attached to lodging foreign merchants.

their livelihood on something other than farming were barely tolerated in Icelandic society. If itinerant priests were to operate successfully they can only have done so under the protection of the chieftains.

There were most likely economic limits to how many priests could be supported in this way. Adam of Bremen complains about the iniquitous ways of the clergy in Denmark and Norway who extracted fees for baptism and confirmation as did the bishops for consecrating altars and ordaining clergy.¹ This most likely was also the practice in Iceland; throughout the middle ages special fees were paid to priests in Iceland for reciting funeral rites.² Fees paid for individual services can however hardly have been the basis for permanent ministries or have acted as an attraction for young men to seek ordination.

As was argued in ch. II 2 at least some leading families identified their fortunes with those of the church from an early stage. It was this aristocratic involvement which no doubt made it possible for the missionaries to work in Iceland, and it was because of this interest that the first Icelanders were sent abroad to become priests. It is likely that the missionary bishops educated and ordained Icelandic men as priests, and that these men were, like the pupils of Bishop Ísleifr, from the higher echelons of society. Towards the end of the century we meet aristocratic priests like Sæmundr *fróði* in Oddi (R), Jón Ögmundsson in Breiðabólstaður (R) and Teitr Ísleifsson in Haukadalur (Á) who owned their respective farmsteads and probably had established an effective cure of souls in their respective areas by the time the tithe was introduced.

Kristni saga's list of chieftains who were ordained during Gizurr's episcopacy and the list of high-born priests from 1143 indicate that in the first half of the 12th century chieftains considered it worthwhile and beneficial for their influence over others to be priests. It is unlikely that they would have sought ordination in such numbers if the priestly rank was swelled by men of humbler rank. In the late 11th and early 12th century chieftains became priests in great numbers (ch. III 5.2) and this suggests that at the time there were few priests about; that by performing priestly services the chieftains increased their influence among their neighbours and followers. That in turn would indicate that by the last quarter of the 11th century at least there had developed among the populace a need for religious services on a regular basis.

In ch. II 4.2 we saw that there are strong indications that shortly after the conversion Christian graveyards had been established outside the home field of most or all farmsteads in the country. We cannot know when churches or chapels began to be

¹ Adam IV, 31

² Grg Ia, 97 8, cf. NgL V, 3022-29. In the late 13th century there is also mention of a fee for extreme unction - DI II, 12, 14, 16-19, DI III, 59-60, 129-30, 257. Bishops also received special fees for consecrating churches and chapels but they were required to give it back to the church or chapel in question - Grg Ia, 1914-18. This practice may originate in the bishops taking a fee for such services for themselves.

built in these graveyards although the mid 11th century date for the church structure excavated at Stong suggests that it was already in that century. If that was the case in general it does attest to an interest in Christianity and a willingness to invest in the necessary trappings.

The conclusion we reach is therefore that by 1097 there must have been a significant number of priests operating in the country; significant in the sense that their labours had produced conditions where many more priests were seen to be needed. It has been argued here that the barrier to an increase in the number of priests was primarily an economic one; there were too few men of such wealth that they could maintain a priest or finance study trips abroad for themselves and demanding fees for individual services was probably not a viable mechanism for maintaining priests or their services in the long run. Living off fees only was probably not to the benefit of the priests; they may not always have been in a strong position to claim their fees from householders and the householders are likely to have resented fees that were too high.

With these preconditions in mind we can appreciate why different layers of society should have supported, or at least not opposed, the introduction of the tithe.

- The chieftains who owned churches and those who were priests themselves or employed priests naturally supported the Tithe law as it made their running of a ministry cheaper and more reliable. They no doubt also welcomed the opportunity to be able to claim money from their neighbours.
- Chieftains who, because of financial constraints, were not already maintaining priests and had not already built churches, as well as others with aspirations to power, must have welcomed the opportunity to found ministries and thereby join the already successful class of priest-chieftains. In other words the tithe offered a much larger portion of the better off an opportunity to establish their own ministries or at least to get their own tithe-areas for the maintenance of their churches.
- It is argued here that householders at large viewed the Tithe law as a rationalisation of an inadequate system, that the services of a priest were already seen to have become a necessity¹ and that paying fees for individual services did not ensure this in a satisfactory manner.

The last point does of course hinge on the 4000 or so householders in the country having full control and authority over the rest of the populace, and while this may not

¹ Cf. Adam of Bremen who maintains that in Norway people are not considered Christian who do not listen to mass every day and give alms - Adam IV, 31 which if even half-true might also hold for Iceland

have been entirely so, it is likely that a sufficient part of the new tithe payers identified their fortunes with that of the head of the household to which they belonged.

Another consideration is that people who were not householders or did not own land were not likely to own very much at all; those who owned less than 10 ounce units worth apart from their everyday clothes did not pay any tithe, nor did those who owned more than 10 ounce units but had to maintain incapable persons. The tithe of those who owned between 10 and 100 ounce units was exclusively apportioned to poor relief.¹ In other words only those who owned more than 100 ounce units, which equals at least 5 cows or 3-4 years wages of a farm-hand around the year 1200² and is more than the maximum annual wages of a priest,³ paid *skiptitíund* or enough tithe to be divided in four, i.e. tithe to the bishops and church-owners only came from those who were relatively well off. Those who owned less than 100 ounce units paid only to poor relief and it is understandable that there was not widespread dissatisfaction with that arrangement as those who owned least property were most likely to hit hard times and therefore stand to benefit from the new system.

In the late middle ages the amount of tithe returned to churches in individual ministries corresponded roughly with 0,25 % of the total value of land in the ministry in question.⁴ That means that tithe was not paid on much property apart from land and if the same holds for the late 11th century it indicates that it was primarily landowners who paid *skiptitíund* while those householders who were tenants were considered to be likely to be unable to pay any tithe, as the paupers' quarter of the tithe was to be given to householders who could not pay tithe.⁵ If there was a considerable body of

¹ Grg 1b, 205₁-206₁₀, 208₃₋₄, 214₇₋₉. The right given to the bishops to direct the tithe allocated to paupers to churches may be a more recent amendment - cf Grg 1b, 228₉ 20. Jón Jóhannesson 1956 208

² Helgi Þorláksson 1981 54

³ Grg 1a, 21₁₋₂

⁴ Based on calculations of tithe returns for eight parish-churches in Dalir in the 14th and 15th centuries.

church	expected tithe	observed tithe returns	
	return in 1703-5	1350-1400	1450-1500
Snóksdalur	130		85.7
Sauðafell	115	120	
Kvennabrekka	85		49.1
Vatnshorn	100	63	102.8
Hljárdarholt	155		112.5
Sælíngsdalstunga	55		46.5
Staðarfell	145		120
Livoll	75		82.5

Expected and observed annual tithe returns of the churches in Dalir, in ells. Expected tithe returns are calculated as total land value of farms in each parish in 1703-5 converted into ells (x 120) and divided by 100 to find the total tithe value, which is then divided by 4 to find the church's quarter. In some of the parishes one or more half-churches may have taken the tithe payable on the farm where it stood, but this could not be taken into account because this type of information is not available for all the parishes or known half churches and is usually more recent than the 14th century. Neither is any attempt made here to evaluate the value of the glebes and other church lands which were exempt from tithe payment. As a result the expected tithe value should be read as a maximum. DI IV, 164, DI V, 101, 494-95, 596, DI VI, 165-66; DI VII, 67, 69, 71, JarðabÁM VI

⁵ No research has been done into the information tithe reckonings can give on the economic structure of Icelandic society. The indications are that it was from the outset extremely unequal, originally with few

householders who could not afford to pay any tithe, that suggests that on the whole servants and the like could not pay much either.

Tithe seems therefore primarily to have been paid by the better off in society. This does not reflect any particular sense of justice or egalitarianism. The Icelandic economy was simply poor and a large part of the population could not do much better than sustain themselves and their dependants. Most of the wealth in society was in the hands of a small group of land-owning householders in whose interest it was to stop impoverished householders from becoming destitute. If they became destitute they could not of course pay rent any more and, a more visible fear: their dependants became the responsibility of other and better off people.

III 2.3. *Maintenance of paupers: The tithe system and the commune*¹

The Icelandic Tithe law is unique in that it makes supervision of tithe assessments the responsibility of the communes and gives the church no part in handing out of alms. This of course reflects the limited extent to which the church had become an institution around 1100, but it also suggests that reform of poor relief was a secular interest which was one of the factors which made the Tithe law acceptable in 1097.

One of the principal chapters of *Grágás*, the *Ómagabálkr*, is devoted to poor relief.² It is an extremely detailed and sophisticated piece of legislation which has few parallels³ and bears witness to a deep-rooted sense that people who cannot sustain themselves are a menace to society.

The *Ómagabálkr* deals with incapable persons, i.e. people who because of their age or health cannot sustain themselves whether they owned money or not, and regulates whose responsibility it is to maintain them. That responsibility rests firmly with next of kin, but failing that, the incapable person's maintenance had to be apportioned between householders in the commune; the quarter or the whole country.⁴ Incapable persons were of two kinds, firstly those who had close kin who could support them, such people were a part of the household which maintained them. The other type did not belong to any particular household, normally because they had no or only distant

very large households where no one owned much except the householder, and that householders of new farms being created in the 11th century and later were mostly tenants who were not much better off property-wise than servants of rich householders.

¹ Sigurður Nordal 1942: 295, Jon Johannesson 1956: 103-109, Magnus Már Lárusson 1962a, Lýður B. Björnsson 1972a: 34-50, Miller 1990: 147-54.

² Grg I b, 1-28, Grg II, 103-51.

³ Rindal 1975. See Tierney 1959 for canonical thinking on poor relief and its practice in England, Prinen 1959 for poor law in Scandinavia. Also Dahlerup 1958b, Hamre 1958b, Suvanto 1961: 1-2, Skyum-Nielsen 1961: 6-7, Björkvik 1961: 11-13, Kealey 1985.

⁴ Grg I b, 178[172].

kin, and were itinerant, staying at a prearranged number of households for short periods of time. This was in no way a humane system; it divided society into two, those who could provide for themselves and those who could not. The latter were defined as a burden and the aim of the law is to apportion their maintenance as fairly as possible. Those who did not qualify for maintenance¹ had no rights whatsoever; aiding vagabonds was punishable and flogging or castrating them was recommended.²

It is clear that maintenance of incapable persons was not seen in terms of charity. Except for meals given to the poor designated by the commune on certain feast days³ the only instance of the compilers of *Grágás* foreseeing a charitable act, that I have come across, is a clause dealing with a man who sustains an incapable person 'for the sake of God'. Even if he was not supposed to maintain the incapable person and the incapable person died, such a benefactor was to inherit the estate of the incapable person while the legal heirs of the incapable person got nothing.⁴ This is of course a warning to potential heirs of incapable persons not to let some virtuous people deprive them of their inheritance and is not an appeal for charity.⁵

The law suggests that the maintenance of paupers could become a matter of disputes, and this is born out by the contemporary sagas,⁶ and that of course tells us that the laws to some extent represent real conditions⁷ and that in reality it was not socially acceptable to let incapable persons starve or freeze. The attitude of the legislators is clear: it was imperative that everyone who was unable to support him/herself was put in charge of somebody else who could sustain him or her. The law of incapable persons also attempts equality in that a householder should only be made to sustain so many incapable persons as would not endanger the economic viability of the household. If there were more incapable persons than a householder could sustain they were to be sustained by more distant relatives or by the commune, or, in other words, householders who were either wealthier or less burdened by the maintenance of incapable persons.

¹ It is not clear if people could be disqualified from maintenance, the law tries to cover every eventuality and the aim seems to be that everyone has a claim on someone to be fed and accommodated. Those who stood outside the system probably did so because they chose to. The legislators seem to envisage that vagabonds are primarily healthy people who because of indolence chose to become beggars. See following footnote. On begging and vagrants also Þorkell Jóhannesson 1933: 177-189, Rindal 1974.

² Grg 1a, 139²⁵-140⁹, Grg 1b, 148²⁷, 173²³ 25, 178²¹ 23, 179¹² 25; Grg II, 151⁵⁻⁷

³ Grg 1a, 25¹¹ 19, 28-26³, 31⁴ 10, 32⁶⁻⁷, 34¹⁸⁻²², Grg 1b, 171¹⁰⁻¹³, 206¹² 14

⁴ Grg 1a, 229¹¹ 14

⁵ The heirs of an incapable person had a right to him or her and the benefactor's chance of profiting from his good deed was remote - reaping rewards in heaven is not among the motivations the compilers of *Grágás* reckon with, there is a hint of scorn in the phrase 'God's gratitude to the other for his toil' [Gvþs þökk hefir hinn lýnr erliþi sitt.] Grg 1a, 171⁴, in a case when a tenant has been so presumptuous as to repair a church without asking the church-owner first and a jury bears witness that services could still have been given in the church without repairs.

⁶ Sturl, 233-34, 552

⁷ There are further indications of this in the saga literature, see Miller 1990: 147-54

The thought behind the *Ómagabálkr* seems to be that the poor and destitute are dangerous to society; either directly because they might steal or kill to get food, or indirectly, which is a more likely consideration, because their maintenance might become too much of a burden for some households, which would then potentially be dissolved and become even more of a burden for someone else.

This explains why the, presumably aristocratic, legislators were at such pains to secure the maintenance of everyone. Iceland was a relatively poor country. It was poor in the sense that the economy was unable to translate its produce into permanent goods, which meant that even if there was plenty of food in normal years and good years, the occasional bad year could have disastrous effects. Most people eked out a living at subsistence level and those who were better off were not so much better off that they could not also be in danger of being swamped by hungry relatives or becoming destitute themselves in bad years. There is a clear sense that keeping society afloat was a delicate balance which must not be upset. It was in a householder's interest to keep his neighbour's household from dissolution; if one household was dissolved it might have a domino effect. The first defence was the kin group, and the second the commune.

A commune was an association of 20 or more *þingfararkaupsbændr* who appointed upto 5 officials to oversee its business. The officials were normally landowners, i.e. the most affluent householders in each commune, although tenants were acceptable if no member objected.¹ Each commune had its assembly which met at least twice a year, where communal matters were solved and inter-communal disputes could be settled. The commune was therefore the smallest judicial unit and the only administrative unit which existed in Iceland before 1262-4. Although the communes had several other tasks, among them insurance of property and management of pasture,² it seems that poor relief was their principal business and the main reason behind their development. If the Tithelaw preserves the arrangement decided on in 1097 - and there is no reason to suspect it does not - it means that the communes were already in existence then, and that they were sufficiently widespread and uniformly organised to take on the administration of the paupers' quarter of the tithelaw.

This suggests that while maintenance of incapable persons was originally and principally the responsibility of the family or kin group it had by the end of the 11th century come to be seen as a matter of concern for the community. It also suggests that the communes had already by then taken on the burden of sustaining incapable persons who had no relatives who could support them. The system of poor relief as represented in the *Ómagabálkr* while clearly displaying the perceived need to keep one's neighbours afloat, does not allow for preventative measures to be taken to ensure they were not

¹ Grg 1b 171₃₋₄, 12 17

² Grg 1b, 171-179, Magnus Mar Larusson 1962a, Lyður B Björnsson 1972a. 33-46

dissolved. The will to do this is apparent in the attempts to distribute the burden of maintaining incapable persons and linking maintenance liability with wealth, but this was obviously a cumbersome system which could not be used to avert the dissolution of households in times of crisis.

This problem was solved by the Tithe law; it put money in the hands of the commune, money which was not intended for the maintenance of incapable persons, but a new category of poor people, *purfamenn* or paupers. Paupers were householders who owned so little property that they did not pay any tithe or had more incapable persons in their charge than they could sustain,¹ and were as a consequence always at risk of becoming destitute. It paid for the community to maintain poor households rather than letting them dissolve and having to sustain its members as incapable persons. This is sound economics; it is cheaper to subsidise poor households so that they nevertheless sustain themselves to some extent, than to allow them to become unproductive as incapable persons or less productive as servants in other households.²

Although the paupers' quarter was primarily intended for the support of poor householders it seems that the commune's officials could distribute it in whatever way they saw fit, the law even envisages that they might want to support other communes.³ It was however the primary aim of the paupers' quarter to keep poor households from dissolution and helping householders who were burdened by many incapable persons to maintain them, the effect being that more affluent householders were less likely to become burdened by the maintenance of their neighbours' dependants.

It is therefore arguable that it was the more affluent householders who benefited most from the Tithe law. It is likely that their direct contribution decreased while the middle income householders who previously had contributed little or nothing had to increase their share in the burden of maintaining the poor.

Poor households benefited in the sense that they were less likely to be dissolved, but accepting aid meant that the commune gained power over their affairs; the number and stability of impoverished households may have increased as a result of the tithe but so did their political dependence on their more affluent neighbours. The Tithe law therefore contributed on a small, but fundamental scale, to increased social differentiation and the formation of extra familial bonds of dependency. It is likely that this was an important influence on early power consolidation; the first requirement for a potential chieftain was to have control over his immediate neighbours and having command of poor relief was surely a very practical way to serve that aim.

¹ Grg 1b, 2068.9, 2084.6.

² Note for instance that paupers (men who had to support incapable persons) were allowed to demand more than the otherwise fixed maximum wages for freelance work - Grg 1a, 1292+26

³ Grg 1b, 2087.9

It has been argued here that in Iceland fear of poverty and the poor resulted in an emphasis on a universal right to basic sustenance. This meant that apportioning responsibility for maintenance of the poor became a matter of the greatest concern, and while the family or kin group was originally responsible for its poor, this responsibility was increasingly falling to the community by the end of the 11th century. There were therefore clear and practical reasons for more affluent householders to support the introduction of the tithe, it put money in their hands which allowed them to manage the affairs of their less affluent neighbours, it lessened the risk of affluent householders having to take on other householders' dependants and increased their chances of establishing direct authority over their neighbours.

The individual poor may have benefited from the tithe in the sense that it enabled householders who otherwise would have gone bust to keep going but as a class they became more distinct and more dependent on affluent householders. It is unlikely that the introduction of the tithe meant an increase in resources directed towards poor relief, the money was just collected and distributed in a different way from earlier. In this way the Church did contribute to increased social differentiation and the development of territorialised authority; it provided the institutional structures around which power could be consolidated.

This is also an example of how the apparent weakness of the early church in Iceland - its inability to administer poor relief with its own agents - meant that Christian institutions were run and fostered by laymen until the church was strong enough to claim its own identity and control of its institutions. While the church never gained control over the administration of poor relief from the communes, the means it provided to invest in pensions and poor relief may have been one of the reasons behind the endowment of churches in the 12th century.

III 2.4 *Political and economic effects of the tithe*

The close ties between chieftains and church in the 12th century have long been recognised as one of the main characteristics of that century and an important stage in the development of secular power in Iceland. Sigrður Nordal coined the term *goðakirkja* (chieftains' church) and applied it to the Icelandic church in the 11th and 12th centuries¹ but Björn Þorsteinsson developed the theme further and called the chieftains of the 12th century *kirkjugoðar* (church-chieftains) and named the period between Bishop Gizurr's death in 1118 and 1230 when the Age of the Sturlungs (*Sturlungaöld*) started, *kirkjugoðaveldi* (Supremacy of the church-chieftains).²

¹ Sigrður Nordal 1942: 296

² Björn Þorsteinsson 1953: 207-229-92, 1966: 88, 207-24, 1978: 100-12

Alongside Jón Jóhannesson, Bjorn Þorsteinsson is undoubtedly the most influential historian of medieval Iceland in the second half of the 20th century and his sharp exposition and lucid style as well as his penchant for sweeping theories on long-term historical developments, will ensure that his influence will be felt for some time to come. While Bjorn Þorsteinsson's own particular brand of nationalistic Marxism¹ is no longer a strong influence in Icelandic historiography, his view that the roots of the political changes which took place in the 13th century are to be found in social and economic changes in the 11th and 12th century has been adopted by virtually everyone writing on the subject, and his assertion that the tithe was the principal factor behind power consolidation in the 12th century is still a powerful notion.²

Like Jón Jóhannesson, Bjorn Þorsteinsson was of the opinion that the church was a crucial influence on the development of Icelandic society in the high middle ages. The difference was that Bjorn Þorsteinsson ascribed to it a largely destabilising role, and the means by which the church affected this instability was through the tithe.³ In his view of medieval Iceland the tithe was imposed on a largely egalitarian agrarian society which had developed in Iceland since the 10th century. In this rather rosy wonderland all was however not well because already the first bishops were determined to establish feudal structures,⁴ and the means to do that was to empower the hitherto largely powerless chieftains by ordaining them and giving them churches which they could profit from.

It was Sigurður Nordal who pointed out the mechanism whereby the tithe was supposed to lead directly to an increase in the wealth and power of church-owners.⁵ He pointed out that churches were privately owned; that their owners received half the tithe and that church property was exempt from tithe payments. It then followed that it became profitable for chieftains to be ordained and give their land to their church. In this way they did not have to pay any tithe themselves or pay for the upkeep of a priest but could stand to profit from the tithe payable to them from their neighbours. To Bjorn Þorsteinsson this meant that the chieftains suddenly received vastly increased amounts of wealth which they promptly invested in land so that by the beginning of the 13th century a manorial aristocracy had arisen balanced at the other end by an expanding class of tenants. The tithe therefore contributed to power consolidation and social differentiation and Bjorn Þorsteinsson attributed particular importance to its influence on the development of the *aðalból* (*höfuðból* in *Jónsbók*, Norwegian: *óðal*, inalienable

¹ On Bjorn Þorsteinsson's historical views and their development see Helgi Þorláksson 1988a

² Particularly in Magnus Stetansson 1975 and Jon Vidar Sigurðsson 1989 96-97 and to some extent Byock 1990 91-95 Also Gunnar Karlsson 1975 38-39, 1980a. 9-11, 24, 30

³ Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1953 205-206, 229, 1966. 171

⁴ Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1966 191

⁵ Sigurður Nordal 1942 296 Ólafur Lárusson had as early as 1929 pointed out that there must have been a relationship between the tithe and chieftains owning churches - Ólafur Lárusson 1944 38-39 See also Gíslí Gíslason 1944 72-88 for a thoroughgoing overview of the sources

and undividable core holding of a family which was always inherited by the eldest son), which he interpreted as a 'feudal' institution.¹

Bjorn Þorsteinsson saw in this reconstructed increase in social and economic differentiation an explanation for the political unrest of the 13th century and the eventual unification with Norway in 1262-64. His view was that the constitution of the Commonwealth as preserved in *Grágás* had developed and acquired its final form in a society of more or less equal householders. Once the economic balance had been tipped it was natural that social and political unrest and reorganisation should follow. This hypothesis was forwarded in opposition to earlier views which ascribed the strife of the 13th century to a lack of moral fibre and a decline in Nordic values.² As such it was a vast improvement on the quality of historical debate but it was unfortunately not supported by research or indeed anything but inference from the Tithe law.

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson who is strongly influenced by Bjorn Þorsteinsson's scholarship has tried to stop this research gap and in a recent work has assembled evidence showing that in the 13th century the chieftains were running large estates with big households, that some of them owned more than one farmstead and that many impoverished people are mentioned. He also argues that tenancy was on the increase.³ To him these were recent developments in the 13th century; the supposed increase in the number of impoverished people was a direct result of the growth in ecclesiastical and aristocratic land-holding and he is unsure if descriptions of large estates in the 10th century indicate that there was an early phase with large estates followed by a more egalitarian period in the 11th and 12th centuries or whether these sources are simply describing 13th century conditions.⁴

It is of course unacceptable to assume that 13th century conditions must be recent developments when no comparable evidence is available for the previous periods. There is no evidence for the system of land ownership in Iceland before the final decades of the 12th century and there is therefore no reason to suppose that it was characterised by a free land-owning peasantry rather than some other system closer to the actual conditions we know from the 13th century. The reason why scholars have always readily assumed a period of free peasantry in equilibrium is that that is what has

¹ Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1966 124-125, 1978 34-36, 108-109, 1986. On the debate concerning *aðalból* see Magerøy 1965 24-28, Magnus Mar Lárusson 1967e, 1970, Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1974 142-51 cf Jakob Benediktsson 1974b, Gurevich 1977, 1987, Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir forthcoming ch 4. For *óðal* in Norway see Helle 1964 110-15, Andersen 1977 84-91.

² Although Bjorn Þorsteinsson was himself not above using such explanations in his earlier works e.g. 'The principal reason why the Icelanders accepted the rule of the King of Norway, was the treason of the Icelandic ruling class [It] lacked the mettle and ambition to form an indigenous state structure and sought foreign assistance to establish such a structure. In that way [the ruling class] humiliated itself and signalled the demise of its powers and prestige and forsook the nation, because it is not possible to sell oneself without loss' Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1953 319. On these and other more poetic kinds of explanations see Jon Thor Haraldsson 1988 29-48.

³ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1989 96-107.

⁴ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1989 100 fn 113, 103 fn 123.

traditionally been expected of pre- or proto-historic Germanic peoples (for complex and no really good reasons) and because that sort of setting seemed to explain the apparently independent householders of *Grágás* and the Sagas of Icelanders in a way which appealed to the 19th and early 20th century audience. While such assumptions served their purpose in an earlier age when nationality and democracy topped the list of historians' interests, they are only assumptions and the necessary research remains to be done before we can assess the relationship between land-ownership and political change in Iceland in the 12th and 13th centuries.

That said, it is reasonable to expect that the tithe did contribute to the changes Icelandic society was undergoing in the 12th and 13th centuries. Great weight must be attached to the significance of a universal tax being imposed on a society which previously had not experienced any sort of regular taxation. The impact of the first generation's experience of taxation is difficult to assess; it is likely that while annual assessments soon became established it did take some time before all three claimants had established an effective collection of their shares.

The communes were in the best position to collect their shares and these are likely to have been paid from an early stage. It was to the benefit of all the householders of a commune that the paupers' tithe was paid, and if one or two tried to evade payment the rest were in a strong position to compel them to pay or else drive them out of the commune.

The collection of the bishop's quarter required a more complex and substantial organisation. The law envisages that the bishops appoint a collector in every district,¹ and they probably chose men with political clout who could influence or control proceedings at assemblies and force payments if necessary. Failing that, the bishops were in a good position to pursue reluctant payers through the judicial system and to bestow political favours on those who carried out the eventual confiscations if it came to that. Collecting the bishop's quarter was therefore manageable even if the bishops only had the most rudimentary administrative structures in place. It is likely that the organisation needed to collect the bishop's tithe and bring the goods to the sees took many years to develop and become effective. It can only however have been a question of time, and developing a system of tithe collections must have been the principal impetus behind the development of episcopal administration as well as being an effective means to increase and consolidate episcopal authority.

While the commune had the advantage of proximity and peer pressure and the bishops that of political influence, contacts and control of assemblies, the position of church-owners to realise their claims must have varied considerably. Their relationship

¹ Grg 1a, 1922-2013, Grg 1b, 20920-2108

with their neighbours might influence their chances of effective tithe collection, as would the stability and permanence of the services they could provide and the tithe payers' perceived usefulness of these. The effective and enduring collection of the church's and priest's portions may have been based on coercion where the church-owners had effective political authority, but it is more likely that it was based on some sort of contractual arrangement whereby those who attended a church on regular basis agreed to pay their tithe there ¹ The effectiveness of this must have depended on three factors.

First is religious inclination. We are not in a position to evaluate the extent to which people in general had become accustomed to attend church as a matter of routine by 1100. The social/religious need to attend church should probably not be underestimated. The Tithe law itself is good evidence that by 1100 there was a perceived lack of permanence and stability in pastoral care and this feeling must have been based on generally accepted attitudes. That however does not preclude the possibility that there was a sizeable part of the population which did not share the majority's view that attending church was desirable and beneficial. Before there were structures in place to compel people to attend church there must always have been those who could find reasons not to.

Second there is the number of effective ministries and the distances people had to travel to attend church. Even if people may have been interested in attending church on a regular basis this may not always have been workable because of long distances to the nearest church where services were given. Again the Tithe law itself is evidence that a sufficient number of ministries in sufficiently many regions had been established by 1100 for it to be conceivable to introduce such legislation. There are still likely to have been many areas, especially where settlements were widely separated, where attending church more than occasionally was not an option. It is difficult to see why people who never or seldom attended a church should have consented to pay the same amount to the church-owner as he collected from more regular attenders. The capacity to compel infrequent attenders to pay is something which can only have evolved after the coercive and territorial powers of chieftains and the effectiveness of the bishops' supervisory powers had become more established than they seem to have been around 1100.

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly there is the political significance of paying and being paid. If the traditional view of a society of reasonably equal property-owning householders running relatively small farmsteads more or less independently of each other is to be taken seriously, it follows that a great number of such householders and their retainers must have agreed to pay tithe to a smaller group of church-owning

¹ This reciprocal relationship was probably symbolised by the feast of the church's dedication (*dies ecclesiae*) - Grg Ia 140 16.

householders who probably already had an economic and political edge over the others. As however all householders, church-owners or not, are supposed to have had equal political rights it seems unlikely that all those who did not own churches were from the outset happy to place themselves in a subordinate relationship with neighbours whom they had previously regarded as equals. Anyone with ambitions to authority, however modest, must have been suspicious of entering a relationship which added to somebody else's status while reducing the other's social standing to that of a tithe-payer. If there was a large body of politically and economically independent householders who disadvantaged their social and political standing as a result of becoming tithe-payers we should expect that establishing full and universal payment of the priest's and church's portions of the tithe was a long and complicated process.

Although it is the accepted model there is no good evidence for all these equal property-owning householders.¹ Serious research remains to be done in this field and the alternatives need therefore to be kept in mind. A contrary model can be proposed whereby only a small number of householders were politically and economically independent and that it was those who built churches while everybody else were dependent on them in one way or another. The prospective tithe-payers were therefore already in a subordinate position when the tithe was introduced. If this was the case, the effects of the introduction of the tithe will have been quite different from the other model. Collecting tithes will then have been relatively simple and based on pre-existing patterns of authority; the tithe will have cemented those patterns and made them less contingent on personal relationships while increasing the importance of territorial relationships.

Which of these two models is closer to reality greatly affects our assessment of the effects of the tithe on Icelandic society and, indeed, its development in general, but in the present state of research we are only allowed to conclude that despite Ari *fróði's* sanguine version it is possible and even likely that the collection of at least half the tithe was undeveloped in places for a long time after the ratification of the Tithe law. It is possible that in a few places payment of the church's and priest's quarters had not been instituted as late as the mid 13th century, as reflected in the adjustments of the tithe-areas of Stóriás (B) in 1258 and Akrar (B) in 1238x68,² and in some regions of scattered settlements even as late as the beginning of the 14th century, as reflected in the formation of the new ministries of Eyrí in Bitra (V) in 1317 and Kaldaðarnes (V) in

¹ The classical exposition of settlement patterns and household sizes is Ólafur Lárusson 1944 9-58. Also Jon Johannesson 1956 410-15, Björn Þorsteinsson 1953 142-47, 1966 119-25 og 1978 32-37, Byock 1990 55-57, Björn Teitsson & Magnús Stefánsson 1972, Þorvaldur Thorodssen 1908-22 III, 5-30, Miller 1990 111-37. The debate on the extent and significance of slavery is also important in this context. Foote 1975, 1977c, Björn Þorsteinsson 1978 38-41, Anna Agnarsdóttir & Ragnar Arnason 1983 and more generally Karras 1988

² DI I, 594, 596

1304x20,¹ but on the whole it seems likely that tithe-payments had become firmly rooted by the end of the 12th century.

Irrespective of which of the two economic patterns prevailed in Iceland the tithe helped to shape a new type of association of dependency; the relationship between congregation and church-owner. Whatever forces united neighbours before the institution of the tithe, it contributed to the development of a new social unit which was based on territorial rather than personal, familial, economic or political ties. Before the institution of the tithe the possession of a specific farmstead did not necessarily put the householder into any particular type of relationship with anyone, but after tithe-areas had been established, the location of the same farmstead began to predetermine a series of social and economic conditions. In buying or renting a farmstead in the 1050s the prospective householder had to consider the size and quality of the land and he might also have taken account of the neighbours' personalities and whether or not they were domineering or aggressive, although he had no guarantee that these factors would stay unchanged. The prospective householder of the late 12th century entered into very different and much more concrete relationships with his neighbours. He became part of a congregation, a group of people defined only by residence and who, irrespective of personalities, had quite a lot to do with each other. The presence of a consecrated church with a designated tithe-area on the farmstead then defined whether our householder became a tithe-payer or tithe receiver; in other words possession of a certain piece of land with certain qualities had become a factor in defining the social position of the householder.

This, it will be argued at more length in ch. IV 3, is the principal and basic reason behind the power consolidation of the 12th and 13th centuries. The possession of a church and the influence gained by offering a service and making neighbours dependent on it no doubt began this process in the 11th century but it was only after the ties between church and congregation had become institutionalised through tithe-payments that it became possible to accumulate power and to define its extent in terms of territory.

By the beginning of the 13th century the possession of *staðir* and other rich churches had become a basic precondition for taking part in power games. The players' eventual success might depend on their personality, political skill and contacts but many an inept and untactical man was allowed a bid for power and sometimes protracted involvement in politics through the accident of possessing a rich and/or tactically placed church.² The overriding political advantage of possessing a church did not come from any access to disposable wealth like many have imagined but from the access to

¹ DI II, 407, 409-10

² The sons of Þorvaldr *Vinsfróingr* and Sæmundr Jonsson in Oddi are examples of such characters

predefined and fixed ties of dependency between congregation and church-owner. Such ties did not in themselves determine political allegiance but where the church-owners had taken care to use their favourable position to nurture and strengthen the ties with their congregations, such groups must have been fairly unwavering and dependable, if only not to stir up trouble in a chieftain's back-yard.

The reason why some churches had become immensely rich by the beginning of the 13th century was not, as Bjorn Þorsteinsson thought, because church-owners converted tithes into land which they subsequently donated to their churches in order not to have to pay tithes themselves. Although the tithe did of course contribute to the development of the *staðir* and other churches, endowment of churches in the 12th century is a more complex issue which will be examined in detail in the following chapters.

While the tithe did contribute to power-consolidation, it did not do so by putting cash in the hands of chieftains but by creating social units which could be manipulated for political ends.¹ The effect of the tithe on the power structures in the country was also not a simple linear development. On the contrary it seems likely that in the first instance the tithe contributed to an increase in the number of men with claims to authority. This is because while a large number of householders had built churches by the end of the 11th century (ch. II 4.2) it seems that only a few of them had been able to afford the permanent services of a priest. The tithe made it possible for a much larger group of ambitious householders to hire priests and this will have made them potential contenders for authority or at the very least better equipped to withstand or turn to their advantage the encroachments of more powerful chieftains. In short the tithe affected a fundamental change in the nature of politics; it was of course only one of several factors influencing the development, but it was the gaming board itself which became changed as a result of its introduction. Instead of having to spend their energy on forging personal ties with individual householders, chieftains could begin to secure authority over sizeable groups of people. In overcoming this hurdle the stakes were raised and the way carved for the wide-ranging territorial powers which chieftains were beginning to exercise by the mid 13th century.

Here we have considered the wider, political implications of the tithe; its influence on church ownership, pastoral care and episcopal administration in the 12th century will be considered in the following chapters. It remains that the lasting and most deep-seated effects of the tithe were on the conditions of rural life in Iceland. The tithe contributed to the cohesion of the probably pre-existing communes and made poor-relief the prerequisite of these secular associations of householders which were to become the basic units in the country's judicial system with the introduction of *Jónsbók*

¹ Cf Helgi Þorláksson 1982b 88-90, 1983 276 who is emphatic that *stórbændr* cannot have benefited financially from the possession of churches while he concedes that the *goðar* may have.

in 1281. The tithe created a new territorial division, the tithe-area, which in turn defined the congregation, a new social group uniting neighbouring households. The tithe also contributed to the formation of territorially defined ministries which had by the end of the 13th century become the basic divisions of ecclesiastical administration or parishes.

III 3. Churches and property

According to *Páls saga* Bishop Páll of Skálholt (1195-1211) had the churches and priests in his diocese counted because he wanted to give his priests leave to go abroad if there were sufficient numbers left to uphold all the services. Priests were found to be 290 and there were 220 churches. It is clear from the text that annex-churches were not included but only 'churches that by obligation, priests were needed for', in other words churches that had ministries attached to them and which would later be classified as parish-churches.¹ An inventory of churches from the same diocese survives in several manuscripts from the 17th century, listing 242 churches, but giving the total as 220.² It includes several churches that are known to have been moved, deserted or abolished in the 14th and 15th centuries, long before some of the churches also listed in the inventory were established. On this evidence Jón Porkelsson the editor of volume XII of the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* suggested that the inventory had its origins in Bishop Páll's counting of churches around 1200, and that new churches had been added to it subsequently, while churches were not erased from it even if they had been abolished.³ It is possible to identify the 22 churches which were established later and as nothing has been put forward to contradict Jón Porkelsson's analysis it is reasonable to assume that the locations of the 220 churches around 1200 are known to us, although some margin of error has to be allowed for, because of the irregular transmission of this document.

Even if the locations of the 220 churches were not known, the number itself is significant. It means that by 1200 the number of ministries had reached the level it would stay at throughout the middle ages⁴ It therefore gives us a *terminus ante quem* for the process of establishment of ministries around the country. This evidence does not allow us to speculate on the actual number of churches in the country. The high number of churches without ministries in the 14th century makes it unsafe to assume anything about the proportion of churches with ministries in the earlier centuries. The building of a church and the establishment of a ministry are two separate issues, and Bishop Páll's inventory only allows us to pursue the latter one. In this chapter we will examine the different types of evidence for early churches and church-building with emphasis on changing ideas regarding ownership of ecclesiastical property.

¹ [kirkjur þær er at skyldu þurtu presta til at lá] - Bsk I, 136. *Páls saga* was written by a contemporary of Bishop Páll shortly after his death in 1211 - ÍBS I, 348. The number of priests is not the actual number of ordained priests resident in the diocese but the sum of ministries attached to churches as laid down in their charters.

² Edited in Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1993: 68-79, 90-105.

³ DI XII, 1-3. See also Ólafur Lárusson 1944: 123-45, Sveinn Víkingur 1970: 152-70, Sveinbjorn Rafnsson 1993: 79-82.

⁴ I.e. around 220-30 in the southern diocese and 90-100 in the northern based on 14th to 16th century charter collections.

III 3.1. Churches in narrative sources

When discussing early churches the first problem that has to be dealt with is simply that not many churches are mentioned directly in the narrative sources. In the southern diocese only 39 churches are referred to explicitly before 1200.¹ There is however good correlation between a priest living at a farm and that farm having a church even if the church itself is not mentioned until later. There are 226 priests and deacons of the southern diocese mentioned in sources before 1300 whose residence is known; in all cases but two a church can be shown to have been at the farm. Of these 226 all but five lived at farms mentioned in the church inventory connected with Bishop Páll's counting of churches from around 1200. Two lived at farms not known to have had churches, two at farms known to have had half-churches and one deacon is said to have lived at a farm but served a church at another. In the northern diocese all the 103 priests whose residence is known lived at farms which are known to have had churches in the 14th century. This strongly suggests that it is possible to assume that there was a church at a given farm at the time a priest is mentioned as living there, even if the church is not mentioned until much later. Accordingly it is possible to name 67 churches in the southern diocese built before 1200 and 32 in the northern diocese. More than half of these are mentioned only in the last quarter of the 12th century.

There are only five churches which can with reasonable certainty be said to have been built before 1100. These are the cathedral at Skálholt (Á) and the public church at Þingvellir (Á) which the Kings Ólafr Haraldsson and later Haraldr *harðráði* paid for,² the churches at Oddi (R) and Breiðabólstaður í Fljótshlíð (R) which are connected with two early priests who came from abroad around 1080, Sæmundr *fróði* and St Jón Qgmundarson respectively,³ and the church Gellir Þorkelsson (d. 1073/4) built at Helgafell (SD) mentioned above. To this list ten more churches can be added which almost certainly were built before or around 1100. The church at Hólar (Sk) is not mentioned before 1106, but there is every reason to believe that it was long established by that date.⁴ The other nine candidates are based on conjecture from *Kristni saga's* list of chieftains who were ordained in Bishop Gizurr's episcopacy (1082-1118),⁵ considering that it is likely that these chieftains had churches on their farms. The list has 10 chieftains, one of them Sæmundr *fróði* at Oddi already attested, but the farms of

¹ And of them several may be doubted e.g. those mentioned in *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða* which was written in the early 13th century and to which the same principles may apply as to the Sagas of Icelanders. The majority however are from more reliable sources.

² ÍF XXVII, 214, Flar III, 344, ÍF XXVIII, 119, ASB XI, 52.

³ Bsk I, 157.

⁴ ÍF I, 25, Bsk I, 159, 232, 163, 235.

⁵ ASB XI, 50-51.

Table 3. Churches referred to explicitly before 1200

Diocese of Skálholt:			
Valbjótsstaður in Fljótisdalur (A)	HSS	Sturl, 889	1190s
Hallormsstaður (A)	PSO	Bsk I, 282	1179
Þvottá in Álftafjörður (A)	PSO	Bsk I, 282	1179
Rauðilækur (A)	(Sýra þátr), PSO	(ÍF X, 113), Bsk I, 281	(c 1070), 1179
Svínafell (A)	PSO, Annal	Bsk I, 280-81, IA, 119	1179, 1185
Hofðabrekka (2 churches) (VS)	PSO	Bsk I, 282-83	1179
Arnarbæli in Eyjafjallasveit (R)	Miracles of St Þorlákr	Bsk I, 348-49 (+322-3)	1190s
Holt in Eyjafjallasveit (R)	Landnámabók (H)	ÍFI, 63	c 1170
Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (R)	JSA, PSG	Bsk I, 157 (B 229-30), Sturl 172	c 1080, 1185
Hof in Rangárvellir (R)	Miracles of St Þorlákr	Bsk I, 334 (+316)	1198
Keldur in Rangárvellir (R)	PSO	Bsk I, 293	1190s +P
Oddi in Rangárvellir (R)	JSA, PSO	Bsk I, 157 (B 229-30), Bsk I, 320	c 1080 +P
Skarð in Land (R)	PSO	Bsk I, 291	1185
Vellir in Land (R)	PSO	Bsk I, 290	1185
Skálholt (Á)	Hungrvaða	Bysp I, 76, 78, 85f	
Haukadalur in Biskupstungur (Á)	Þorgils s ok Halldra	Sturl, 34	1121 +P
Skálmholt in Flói (annex) (Á)	JSA	Bsk I, 195	c 1200
Þingvellir (Á)	Kristni s. Miracles	ASB XI, 52, Bsk I, 352	1118, 1199
Mosfelli in Mostellissveit (K)	Egils s	ÍFI, 298-99	c 1140 +P
Viðey (K)	Miracles of St Þorlákr	Bsk I, 350	1190s
Hólmur in Akranes (B)	Landnámabók (H)	ÍFI, 65	c 1050
Melar in Melasveit (B)	charter	DI I, 419	c 1180
Bær in Borgarfjörður (B)	PSO	Bsk I, 284-87	1178x93 +P
Reykholt in Reykholtisdalur (B)	charter	DI I, 279-80	1180s +P
Húsafell (B)	charter; Ceciliu s	DI VII, 1-2, HMS, 294-97	c 1170 +P
Stafholt in Stafholtstungur (B)	charter	DI I, 179-80	c 1140
Staðarbraun (B)	charter	DI I, 174	c 1120
Helgatell (SD)	Laxdæla, PSG, Annals	ÍF V, 229, Bsk I, 425, IA, 118, 180	c 1060, 1181 +P
Sælingsdalstunga (SD)	Eyrbyggja s	ÍF IV, 183-84	c 1175x1221 +P
Hvammur in Hvammssveit (SD)	Sturlu s	Sturl, 63, 75-76	1160-1171 +P
Skarfsstaðir (chapel) (SD)	Sturlu s	Sturl, 75	1171
Fagnidalur (annex) (SD)	Sturlu s	Sturl, 70	1169
Hvoll in Saurbær (SD)	Sturlu s	Sturl, 68	1160s +P
Staðarhöll in Saurbær (SD)	Þorgils s ok Halldra	Sturl, 24, 25	1119 +P
Flatey (SD)	Annal	IA, 61	1192
Saurbær in Rauðisandur (V)	HSS	Sturl, 889-90	1190s
Hvalsker (chapel) (V)	HSS	Sturl, 890	1190s
Vatnsfjörður in Ísaljardardjúp (V)	Árna s biskups	ÁB, 32	aq 1150 +P
Káltanes (annex) (V)	PSG	Bsk I, 425	1182
Diocese of Hólar:			
Breiðabólstaður in Vesturhóp (H)	Kristni s	ASB XI, 57	1150
Þingeyrar (H)	JSA	Bsk I, 171 (B 244) cf IA, 320	1112
Hólar in Hjaltadalur (Sk)	JSA	Bsk I, 163 (B 235)	c 1050 1106x10
Marbæli in Óslandshlíð (annex) (Sk) PSG		Sturl, 122	1187x89
Holt in Fljót (Sk)	JSA	Bsk I, 197-98	1198 +P
Þjorn in Svartárdalur (L)	GSD	Sturl, 136	1191
Hotsá in Svartárdalur (annex) (E) PSG		Bsk I, 440	1190x96
Árskógur in Árskógsströnd (E)	GSD	Sturl, 133	aq 1191 +P
Auðbrúkkja in Horgárdalur (E)	GSD	Sturl, 169	1199
Langahlíð in Horgárdalur (E)	GSD	Sturl, 152	1197
Oxnhöll in Horgárdalur (E)	GSD	Sturl, 136	1191 +P
Bærsá in Oxnadalur (L)	GSD	Sturl, 168	1199
Hralnagil in Eyjafjörður (L)	PSG	Bsk I, 456	1198 +P
Saurbær in Eyjafjörður (L)	PSG	Bsk I, 460	1200
Lautás (L)	Annals PSG	IA, 117, 322, Bsk I, 417	1167-9 +P
Flatey in Skjálfandi (L)	Miracles of St Þorlákr	Bsk I, 366	1190s

Abbreviations: GSD *Guðmundar saga dyra*, HSS The separate version of *Hrafnis saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, JSA *Jóns saga*, A version JSB *Jóns saga* B version, PSG *Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar*, PSO (*Oddaverja þátr* in *Þorlaks saga* B and C, +P: also evidence that a priest lived there)

Table 4. Farms where there is indirect evidence for churches before 1200

Diocese of Skálholt:					
Holteigur in Jokuldalur (A)	Porgils s ok Hafliða	Sturl, 25	P	c	1120-45
Kirkjubær in Síða (VS)	PSA	Bsk I, 94-95	P		1160s
Gunnarsholt in Rangarvellir (R)	GSD, Annal	SturlR I, 161 IA, 119	P	aq	1186
Skarð in Rangarvellir (R)	GSD	Sturl, 161-62	P		1198
Fellsmúli in Land (annex) (R)	PSO	Bsk I, 290	V	c	1185
Leirubakki in Land (R)	PSO	Bsk I, 290	V	c	1185
Vestmannaeyjar (R)	Miracles of St Þorlákr	Bsk I, 351 (+117, 306, 321)	P		1190s
Hruni in Hrunamannahreppur (Á)	Annals, GSD, Haukðœla þ	IA, 120, 180, Sturl, 155-56, 193 288	P		1190s
Bræðratunga in Biskupstungur (Á)	Íslendinga s	Sturl, 186	P		1197
Gaulverjabær in Flói (A)	charter	DI I, 404	P		1178x93
Amarbæli in Ölfus (Á)					
or Eyjafjallasveit (R)	Miracles of St Þorlákr	Bsk I, 339	V	c	1200
Reykir in Ölfus (Á)	Miracles of St Þorlákr	Bsk I, 339	V	c	1200
Reynivellir in Kjós (K)	Miracles of St Þorlákr	Bsk I, 340	V	c	1200
Saurbær in Kjalarnes (K)	PSG, Annals	Bsk I, 418 IA, 118, 323, 476	P	aq	1175
Lundur in Lundarreykjadalur (B)	Íslendinga s	Sturl, 184	P		1195
Deildartunga (annex) (B)	Sturlu s	Sturl, 90-91	P	c	1165-74
Borg in Mýrar (B)	Íslendinga s	Sturl, 210	P	aq	1202
Staðarstaður in Snæfellsnes (SD)	Íslendinga s	Sturl, 211	P	c	1140-70
Hjarðarholt in Lavárdalur (SD)	Kristni s , Hungrvaka	Bsk I, 29, 79 Sturl, 8, 186	P	c	1120-97
Ásgarður in Hvammssveit (SD)	Sturlu s	Sturl, 67, 69-70, 82	P	c	1160-72
Skarð in Skarðsströnd (SD)	Sturlu s, Íslendinga s	Sturl, 54, 68 182, 187	P		1148-1201
Reykhólar in Reykjanes (SD)	Kristni s , PSG	Bsk I, 29, 424	P	c	1120, 1181
Staður in Reykjanes (SD)	PSG	Bsk I, 457 cf 464	P		1199
Hagi in Barðaströnd (V)	HSS	Sturl, 893 920, 923	P		1197-1212
Eyri in Arnarfjörður (V)	HSS	Sturl, 884	P	c	1190
Mýrar in Dýrafjörður (V)	HSS	Sturl, 897	P	c	1195
Staður in Steingrímsfjörður (V)	PSG HSS	Bsk I, 424, Sturl, 893	P	aq	1181-97
Diocese of Hólar:					
Staður in Reynines (Sk)	PSG	Bsk I, 455	P		1198-9
Víðmyn (Sk)	PSG	Bsk I, 457	P		1199
Sillfrastaðir in Blönduhlíð (Sk)	GSD	Sturl, 133	P	c	1190
Miklibær in Blönduhlíð (Sk)	PSG	Bsk I, 435	P		1187 9
Víðvík in Víðvíkursveit (Sk)	PSG	Bsk I, 436	P		1189-90
Hof in Hofðaströnd (Sk)	PSG	Bsk I, 430	P		1185-7
Fell in Sléttahlíð (Sk)	GSD	Sturl 133	P	c	1190
Knappsstaðir in Fljót (Sk)	JSB	Bsk I, 248	P		1121
Útsir in Útsaströnd (F)	PSG	Bsk I, 450	P		1196-8
Vellir in Svartárdalur (L)	PSG GSD	Bsk I, 437 Sturl 135	P		1190-96
Úrðir in Svartárdalur (L)	GSD	Sturl, 157	P		1198
Grund in Eyjafjörður (L)	PSG	Bsk I 418	P	aq	1173
Laugaland in Horgárdalur (L)	GSD	Sturl 136	P		1191
Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður (L)	Kristni s GSD	Bsk I, 29 Sturl 130	P	c	1120 1188
Grenjastaður (P)	JSB,	Bsk I, 242	P		1106x21
	PSG GSD	Bsk I, 472 Sturl, 123	P	pq	1185
Helgastaðir in Reykjadalur (P)	GSD	Sturl, 124	V		1186

A priest living at a farm and a bishop visiting a farm is taken as indirect evidence for a church there

Abbreviations (See Table II 2) PSA *Þorlaks saga* A version P record of priest living at the farm V record of bishop visiting a farm

three of the others are unknown, although informed guesses can be made regarding two of them. Ari *fróði* probably lived at Staðarstaður in Snæfellsnes (SD), his son lived there. Ari's family was from the region and Staðarstaður was early an important church¹ Ketill Guðmundsson (d 1158) possibly lived at Holt in Fljót (Sk), he was called Fljóta-Ketill which suggests the region he was from and he was probably the father of a Jón

¹ Sturl, 211 IF I, 20, 28, 122, 142, DI II 114

Ketilsson who was priest at Holt and owned the *goðorð* in the area later in the century (d. 1192).¹

To these 14 churches several more can be added with ever diminishing degrees of certainty. For instance it could be suggested that there was a church at Hof in Vopnafjörður (A) when Gizurr Ísleifsson lived there before becoming bishop,² or at Laugardalur (Á) where the bishop-elect in 1080 Guttormr Finnólfsson was from.³ Other major churches known from the first years of the 12th century, like Grenjaðarstaður in Aðaldalur (Þ) or Hofteigur in Jokuldalur (A),⁴ could also be suggested. Similarly it could be argued that *Sǫrla þáttur's* information about the burial of Kolbeinn Flosason (Lawspeaker 1066-71) at Rauðilækur in Ingólfshofðahverfi (A) is so quaint and out of place that it must be true.⁵

Interpreting these scraps of information leads in two opposite directions. On the one hand it is obvious that the source material is far from complete and one would expect to hear first of the richest and most important churches, because they are connected with the richest and most important people whose names and deeds were preserved by their rich and important descendants. On the other hand it could be argued that the oldest churches were the most likely to become rich and important and that as there is no direct evidence to suggest that churches were more numerous it is not possible to suggest that they were.

Although there is reason not to dismiss the latter alternative it cannot be overlooked that the patchiness of the sources is demonstrable. More than half of the 67 churches in the southern diocese attested before 1200 are mentioned in the context of events occurring in the last decades of the century, i.e. shortly before Bishop Páll had the churches counted. That the sources fail to mention nearly 3/4 of churches can only tell us that they are not a useful indicator of the number of churches in any period. Sources like the miracles of St Þorlákr, *Sturlu saga*, *Guðmundar saga dýra* and *Prestsaga Guðmundar Arasonar* - which are all believed to have been written very shortly after 1200⁶ - give the impression that in the second half of the 12th century the density of churches and number of priests was not substantially lower than in the 14th century. Chapels and dependent churches appear to be common, and in areas like Dalir and around Trollaskagi where events are described in detail, a very high proportion of the later parish churches are mentioned. This really only confirms the evidence of Bishop Páll's inventory that by 1200 a tight network of ministries had been established

¹ Sturl. 129-130 Luðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 III, 525-25

² Bysp I, 83

³ Bysp I, 78

⁴ Bsk I, 242, Sturl, 25

⁵ ÍF X, 113 Kolbeinn does not figure at all in this short *þáttur*, and is not connected with its subject in any other way than being the husband of a great niece of Sǫlvi, whose bid for a wife the *þáttur* relates

⁶ IBS I, 315-16, 474

in Iceland. It does not allow us to attach any earlier dates to the end of that process. The narrative sources can not be used to discern whether the formation of ministries was long complete before the second half of the 12th century, whether that process was in its final stages then or even if it had only recently got under way. What the narrative sources do add to the evidence of Bishop Páll's inventory is that the system of dependent churches and chapels served by priests attached to some kind of principal churches was already in existence in the late 12th century.

Apart from incidental references to chapels and churches which according to more recent sources were dependent, there are a few stories from the late 12th century which clearly indicate that the system of dependency was in place. According to *Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar* when Guðmundr was a priest at Mikliþær in Óslandshlíð (Sk) in 1187x89 'he had annex-service to a farm called Marbæli, he sang [mass] there one feast day.'¹ Later, in 1190x96 when Guðmundr was a priest at Vellir in Svarfaðardalur (E) he sang mass at a church at nearby Hofsa.² That the ties of dependency were formal and fixed is witnessed by a dispute arising from a ruined chapel at Hvalsker in Patreksfjorður (V) in the 1190s.

At the farm where Ingi lived [i.e. Hvalsker] there was a chapel. It was subject to the church in Rauðisandur [i.e. Saurbær]. But it was the command of the holy bishop Þorlákr [1178-93] that where chapels had been built they should nowhere become derelict, and if a chapel was in disrepair or fell in ruins then six ounce units should be paid from the site to the burial-church which the chapel was subject to. At the farm where Ingi lived the chapel fell in ruins but Ingi did not repair it and refused to pay for the site. Markús [church owner at Saurbær] claimed the money from Ingi but he did not pay it. From thereon animosity grew between Markús and Ingi.³ It is clear from the context that burial-church refers to a main church to which chapels (and possibly other churches) can be subject. That disrepair of a chapel incurred fines to the church it was subject to, suggests that the main church normally received an income from a chapel presumably in return for services. The source here is the separate version of *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* which is believed to have been written ca. 1230-60⁴ and may therefore reflect mid 13th century conditions. There is however little reason to be suspicious of the association between the command and St Þorlákr; if chapels were as numerous in the 13th century as later it is likely that the command and its instigator was well known to the saga's audience.

¹ [þa átte hann brottsong á þann bæ er á Marbæle heitur þangat song hann einn hátíðardag] - Bsk I, 435
Brottsongr can be translated as annex service, it means literally 'away-song', *ad eiga brottsong til* is used of a priest who is duty bound to sing mass at a dependent church at regular intervals

² [hann song messa heiman til Hofsar] - Bsk I, 440

³ [Á þeim bæ er Ingi bjó var bænahús. Það lá undir þa kirkju er á Rauðasandi var. En það var boð hins heilaga Þorlaks biskups að hvergi skyldi bænahús niður falla þar sem aður voru og ef bænahús hromaði eða félli niður þá skyldi af tóftunni gjalda sex aura til graftarkirkju þeirrar er bænahúsið lá undir. Á þeim bæ er Ingi bjó fell bænahús ofan en það hus lét Ingi er upp gera og ei vildi hann gjalda af tóftunni. Það fé heimtu Markús að Inga en hann galt ei féið. Þaðan af óx óþykkt með þeim Markusi og Inga] - Sturl, 890

⁴ IBS I, 315

The most famous passage on church organisation in the late 12th century is in a much more difficult source; the *Oddaverja þáttur* in the B and C versions of *Þorláks saga helga* which has both been suggested to be a translation of a part an original Latin Vita from ca. 1200 and a work of propaganda from the second round of *Staðamál* after 1270.¹ It is naturally of great importance for the understanding of this source which hypothesis is accepted. As will be discussed in ch. III 3.4 there are more grounds for accepting the latter alternative and that of course calls for caution in the interpretation of *Oddaverja þáttur*. According to this source St Þorlákr visited the Eastern quarter in his first summer as bishop of Skálholt in 1179 successfully gaining control over the majority of the privately owned churches there. On his way back to Skálholt in the autumn he met the chieftain Jón Loftsson at Hofðabrekka in Mýrdalur (VS). Jón (d. 1197) was the most powerful chieftain in the country in the last decades of the 12th century and had recently extended his power sphere to the east by acquiring Hófðabrekka 'which was reckoned among the best [estates] before Hofðá [river] damaged it.'² We are told that a storm had ruined two churches 'but Jón had then had a new church built, a very well appointed construction; the holy Bishop Þorlákr was to sojourn there that autumn ... It was planned that he would consecrate the church there.'³ In the morning before the consecration was to take place Jón and St Þorlákr discussed the conditions of the church's charter resulting in a famous exchange of words where Jón flatly refused to relinquish the control of his church even after St Þorlákr had threatened to excommunicate him. But there was another matter of contention between them

arising from floods in the river Hofðá, because it had destroyed many farms, which were subject to [Hofðabrekka] and two where there were churches. That resulted in less tithes and fewer houses [= churches, chapels] to give. Because of this Jón wanted there to be no more than one priest and a deacon at the church, but earlier there had been two priests and two deacons. This was granted by the honourable bishop on these same grounds.⁴

The author may have been confusing traditions in having two churches broken by storm and two that perished in floods; it seems one too many natural catastrophes to befall a small area in a short time. It is however not unthinkable, and the author seems to indicate that Hofðabrekka itself was one of the churches which was broken by the storm but that both of those which were destroyed by the flood were annexes. In the 14th century there was one priest and a deacon at Hofðabrekka and three farms in the

¹ ÍBS I, 476-77

² [er eithvert þóttu bezt vera, áðr en Hofðá spilltu] - Bsk I, 282

³ [en nú hafði Jón þar gera látið nýja kirkju, ok mjök vandaða að smíð, áttu heilagr Þorlákr biskup þar gisting at taka þat sama haust. Var ætlat at hann skildi þar kirkju vígja] - Bsk I, 282

⁴ [ok stóð su at Hofðárhlaupi, þvíat hún hafði tekit marga bæi, þa er þangat lágu undir, ok tvá þá, er kirkjur voru á. Varð af því minni tíund, ok lærr hus til brottsongs. Vildi Jón fyrir því, at ei væri meir en einn prestir ok djakn at kirkjunni, en áðr voru tveir prestar ok tveir djáknar. Lét herra biskup þat leiddast fyrir þessa somu skynsemi] - Bsk I, 283

ministry, two of which had half-churches.¹ That is a very small parish to have a deacon and this may suggest that the ministry had previously included more farms.

Hofðabrekka is situated on the eastern edge of the Mýrdalur mountain range (VS) overlooking what is now a coastal desert called Mýrdalssandur which is dominated by glacial rivers. Apart from *Oddaverja þáttur* there are indications that this area was habitable and densely settled before the 13th century and further to the east the communities in Álfaver and Meðalland (VS) are still being gradually reduced by land erosion from sand and glacial waters. It seems that the settlements in Mýrdalssandur had to a large extent disappeared by the 14th century and it may even be that they had long since been devastated or greatly reduced when *Oddaverja þáttur* was written.² Hofðabrekka itself was situated on the lowlands and was only moved to its present location in the hills after a flood in 1660 and another farm remained on the lowlands until a flood in 1721 forced its relocation into the hills.³ The extent of the devastation by the 12th or 13th century flood in Hofðá river (now Múlakvísl) is unclear but the farms and churches which were supposed to have perished must have been situated on the lowlands which subsequently became desert, so that only four farms remained in the ministry of Hofðabrekka. If that was so it is likely that the author based his story about the clash between St Þorlákr and Jón Loptsson around folkloric explanations about the devastation of the settlements in Mýrdalssandur. Such folklore is common in Iceland, tales of flourishing communities perishing as a result of floods, lava or plague have long been a source of horror and fascination, and the common theme in these stories is that the abandonment of the settlements is always the result of a single catastrophic event. Archaeological and historical research has shown that this is only rarely the case; the causes for farm abandonment are usually complex and the abandonment of whole communities is normally a drawn out process.⁴ While *Oddaverja þáttur* does not claim that the whole community in Mýrdalssandur was abandoned it clearly indicates that the abandonment of many farms was permanent and was the result of a single recent natural catastrophe. It is safest to interpret this as a folkloric theme, which indicates that the author was somewhat removed in time from the events he was describing, strengthening the case for the late 13th century time of writing. It also indicates that the information contained in these passages about parochial arrangements may not be taken at face value. It is more likely that the tale about the former importance of the farm and church

¹ At Kerlingadalur and Hjørleifshofði, the third farm was Fagnadalur DI II, 741, DI III, 293, DI IX, 88-189, Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1947: 201-202.

² Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1947 has collected all the documentary evidence for the settlements in Mýrdalssandur, and for this part of it - the so-called Lágeyjarhverfi - his conclusions are that they must have been fragile from the outset, although Lágey - where tradition has it that there was a church - may have been occupied into the 14th century. See also Sigurður Þorarinsson 1974: 76-79.

³ Sigurður Þorarinsson 1974: 79.

⁴ Gissel ed. cum al. 1981, Vilhjálmur Ó. Vilhjálmsson 1989, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1990a: 93-100, Guðrun Sveinbjarnardóttir 1992: 171-77.

at Hofðabrekka, its numerous staff and dependent churches was preserved in connection with the tale about the vanished settlements in Mýrdalssandur, and that the author worked out the details in accordance with accepted practices and conditions in his own time. That means that a bishop's say in the staffing of churches may not have been established in the late 12th century, while *Oddaverja þáttur* is naturally a good source for it being firmly established in the second half of the 13th century; not even the rebellious Jón Loptsson is meant to have questioned that. It also means that we cannot say if tithe areas were as firmly and formally fixed in the late 12th century as *Oddaverja þáttur* indicates that they were in the late 13th, and that we cannot use this source to show that the terms of charters were a matter of agreement between bishop and church-owner before the 13th century. This does of course not mean that these features could not have been in place in the late 12th century; they may have been, but there are no reliable sources to confirm that.

To sum up, the narrative sources cannot on their own be made to throw any light on the nature and development of church building and parish formation in the first two centuries of Christianity in Iceland. *Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar* and *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* do suggest that already before 1200 a sort of a parochial structure was in place, at least regarding ties of dependency between a main church with a priest or priests attached and lesser churches and chapels. This was the most conspicuous feature of the Icelandic parish system when more detailed sources become available in the 14th century and later, and it governed payments of the tithe and the priest's fee, as well as the distribution and number of masses and hours given in different churches. How fixed in geographical terms and formal in legal terms this structure had become in the late 12th century we cannot say on the basis of the narrative sources. Nor do they allow us to speculate on the extent of episcopal authority over tithe arrangements, staffing of churches or the distribution of services between churches within a ministry.

III 3.2 *The charter evidence*

As discussed in ch. I 3 6 there seem to have been two principal types of charter in the 12th century. On the one hand there were records of the property belonging to a church, like the charters of Reykholt (B) and Kírkjubær (VS), and on the other there were documents recording the conditions under which a church was held by its caretaker. It is primarily with the latter type we will be concerned in the following. The charter of Húsafell (B) is the earliest datable example of this type. It is principally a record of the establishment of a *staðr* at Húsafell and deals with the extent and arrangements of the functions of this institution. To the church-owner the most important clause must have

been the one where control of the church property is secured for him and his descendants:

Brandr Þórarinnsson shall have charge of this church property for as long as he wants to, and then his sons for as long as they want to. They appoint a caretaker if they want to depart but if they have no heirs that can [have] control, then a man from their family shall be appointed to have charge of the church property, a man whom the bishop who rules in Skalholt thinks is suitable.¹

Although it is not explicitly stated it is likely that the charter represents the terms of agreement reached between church-owner and bishop when the *staðr* was established or when the church was consecrated if the two events did not coincide. Similar documents are preserved from Hítarnes (B) and the monastery at Helgafell (SD), the latter with a likely dating of 1184x88.

[Hítarnes] Jǫrundr shall have charge of this church property and his heirs, if the bishop thinks they are suitable, but otherwise someone who the bishop wishes from the kindred of Þórhallr or Steinunn.²

[Helgafell] We have decided this arrangement, that Guðmundr and Ólafr and Eyjólftr shall take over the *staðr* here at Helgafell and be in charge of a community of Canons [regular] as large as it will be, while I live, but hold the *staðr* for as long as they want to and if they have health, and that one of them who lives longer, if he has health. Now I want that either Guðmundr or Ólafr take this seat after me but if that will not be so, then I want that they have control over the finances and take an abbot, if that may transpire, I would prefer that he was from our kin group, if that is possible with the bishop's supervision.³

Most of the charters dated to the 12th and 13th century in DI are not dated securely enough to be useful sources but three can be mentioned which are relevant to the discussion about 12th century church landscape. A charter of Melar in Melasveit (B) from 1199x1226 states that the church there owns 'the whole land at Melar with all the goods which Þorlákr bought and Magnús has since donated.'⁴ Magnús Þorláksson is

¹ [Brandr þ skal varðveita kirkio fe þesse meðan hann vill en þa synir hans meðan þeir vilja taka þeir mann til varþveitlo ef þeir vilja fra rþase en ef þeir eigo eigi erfingia þa er forrþ kunne þa skal taka mann til or kyne þeirra. at varþveita kirkio ten þann er biscope þeir vel til fallinn þeim er tyrr rþe i Skala hollte] - DI I, 217-18

² [Jorundr skal varþ veita þessom liam oc hans erfingiar ef biscope þickia þeir til fallnir en ella or þorhalls kyne eþa steinunnar sa sem biscop vill] - DI I, 275-76 Þórhallr and Steinunn were probably the parents of Jǫrundr

³ [Þenna rþahag holom ver rþit at þeir Guþmundr oc Olaftr oc Eyjolftr scolo taka vif staþ her at Helgafelli oc halda her kanoka lif sva fiolment sem þa vill verþa. meðan lif mitt er en hafa staþ meðan þeir vilja oc þeir verþa til lærr oc sa þeirra sem lengr lifir ef sa er færtr Nu vilda ec at annarr hvarr guþmundr eþa olaftr tæki þetta sæti eþtr mic en ef eigi verþr sva þa vilda ek at þeir hefðe fiarrþ oc tæke abota ef sva vill ganga. þætte mer bezt at at varo kyne være ef sva ma með umtio biskops] - DI I, 282 'We' is probably Qgmundr Kallsson the first abbot of Helgafell (1184-88) but the others are unknown - the second abbot is usually considered to be one Þorfinnr Þorgeirsson (d. 1216) - Jon Jóhannesson 1941: 155

⁴ [a mela land allt með ollvm goðvm eim er tilforlaçt ceypu oc magnvs hefir sidan til lagt] - DI I, 419 The charter of Melar dated to [1181] in DI I, 272 is a 15th century copy of the *Vik hinsbók* copy of the first charter

mentioned in 1179¹ and was probably more than middle aged by then and may have lived a few years into the 13th century. The charter refers to him in the present tense and has the church dedicated to St Þorlákr who was canonised at the Alþing in 1199.² The donation could have been made long before the charter was drawn up. The charter is of the Húsafell type although its style is closer to the mainstream pre 1300 charters and it does not have a clause on control over the property. We know however that control over the *staðr* at Melar remained in the hands of Magnús's descendants throughout the 13th century.³

In an early or mid 13th century charter of Gaulverjabær in Flói (Á) there is this message at the end: 'Eyjólfur upheld this charter [= agreement] when he lived at Bær and rendered then what the holy bishop Þorlákr and Gunnarr priest had agreed on.'⁴ This seems to mean that in 1178x93 St Þorlákr and the priest Gunnarr, who presumably owned Gaulverjabær, made an agreement where Gunnarr promised to donate something to the church. *Ad halda upp máldaga* probably means that Eyjólfur (Gunnarr's heir?) had declared the agreement formally at an assembly,⁵ rather than that he only honoured its terms, although that possibility cannot be ruled out. What is clear is that it was left to Eyjólfur to pay up whatever it was that Gunnarr had promised, which does suggest that the bishops of Skálholt had some kind of overview over what had been promised to their predecessors and did try to see to that such promises were kept.

In DI a charter of Álftamýri in Arnarfjorður (V) is dated to 1211, based mainly on a questionable identification of one of the donors mentioned in the charter.⁶ This charter is definitely earlier than the charters of Álftamýri in *Hítardalsbók* and *Vilchinsbók*,⁷ and its features are so unusual - some are unique - that it must be considered unlikely that it was made later than the mid 13th century when conventions had developed in episcopal charter making. It is of course possible that church-owners continued to have their own charters drawn up and have them declared in the Law Court - like this one was - but there is no evidence to support that. In this case that hardly applies as the charter's main interest is in the running of the church and no mention is made of who is to be in control. It is more likely that this charter is among the oldest, written in a time when traditions on the basic shape and content of charters were still developing, and long before charters were routinely drawn up by the bishops. The time-

¹ Sturl, 92

² IA, 22, 62, 121, 181, 324, Bsk I, 134, 456

³ Magnús's great-grandson the Lawman Snorm Markússon lived at Melar and died in 1313 - IA, 343

⁴ [Þessum máldaga helt eyjólfur vpp þa er hann bio j bó og reiddi þa at hondum sem þeir giorðv sin a milli þeir þorlacr biskvp hinn helgi og gunnar prestir] - DI I, 404

⁵ CI Grg 1b, 185₁₇ where *halda upp* refers to a declaration at an assembly. *Ad halda upp kirkju* on the other hand means to be answerable for a church (Grg Ia, 17₁₆) the core meaning in both usages apparently being 'to hold up in full view'

⁶ DI I, 371-72

⁷ DI III, 776, DI IV, 147. The charter in DI IV 12-13 is probably more recent than *Vili hunsbók*

frame for this charter is therefore c. 1100 to c. 1250, probably earlier rather than later in this period. The name Cecilia among the church's benefactors may suggest a tighter time frame, i.e. the second half of the 12th century when the name was in vogue as a result of the saint's popularity ¹

The most unusual features of this charter are firstly that the church's share of property on Álfamýri is expressed as the total value of the farm, and not the proportion of the land owned by the church and number of livestock as is otherwise the convention.

Secondly that the 12 ells which are to be given to the needy every autumn are to be divided with other tithes. The payment of a specific sum to the poor is unusual, although not unknown,² but this is the only instance where it is specified that the money is to go into the pool which the commune had at its disposal for the maintenance of paupers. Normally it was at the priest's or church-owner's discretion to whom such support was given.

Thirdly that masses are to be sung in the period when the Alþing was in session, but such detail is unusual, the only comparable cases being permission to give fewer masses or none at all in the Alþing time.³ The priest at Álfamýri was clearly not to attend any synod or ecclesiastical courts, whereas the possibility is mentioned that he might have reason to leave his þing (ministry), at other times presumably, in which case mass had not to be sung three days every week. Relaxing services because the priest might not be at home is only mentioned in one other charter,⁴ and they must both belong to some other period than the 14th century when episcopal statutes are adamant that priests should never leave their cure of souls.⁵ The fourth feature is unique:

The priest shall mention, in every mass which he sings at the church of St Mary, all those men who have donated their riches to that church in particular [he should] name Steingrímur, Þuríður, Karr, Yngvildr, Hogni the priest and Cecilia, and turn his mind to all those men who have given their alms to it ⁶

This is the only indication in the whole corpus of Icelandic charters that a church might have been established by a group of people or even a commune. The six people named seem to be three couples and the special consideration they are accorded may suggest that they were instrumental in the establishment of the church or were responsible for its principal endowments. That there were many other people who had given alms to the church may also suggest that its upkeep was a communal interest. The church does not however seem to have been run communally because in the next clause the householder

¹ Sturl, 109, NID, 189, NIDs, 195

² DI II, 396, 778-80, DI III, 115, DI IV 180-3, 214-15

³ DI I, 303, 416-419, DI II, 480-81

⁴ From Hól in Gnúpverjahreppur (A) - DI I 303

⁵ DI II, 512, 519, 539, 805, 817

⁶ [Prestr skal minnase j hverre messo er hann syngur at Marto kirkio þeirra manna allra. er sin auþæte hafa lagt til þeirrar kirkio nefna til einkum Steingrim þorþe Kar Yngvildi Hogna prest oc Cecilia oc renna hug sinom of alla þa menn er sina Imoso hafa þangat lagt] - DI I, 371-72

(*buande*) is required to light the church at night for a specified period, which suggests lay charge (*varðveizla*) of the church.¹ It is conceivable that the church property was considered to be in the control (*forráð*) of a group of people or the commune and that they delegated the charge (*varðveizla*) of the church to the secular householder of the church farm. The householder was then considered to have the same responsibilities as the *fundatores*, on the same principle as tenants of church owners took over at least some of the responsibilities of church-charge (see below). Whatever arrangements there were at Álftamýri, it is clear from this clause that they were not of the same kind as at most private churches, where private control was justified on the basis that the owner, or his or her heir, was the principal donor.²

A fifth unusual feature is a clause where it is stated that the charter has now been declared in the Law Court.³ As mentioned above it was the intention of the legislators in the Old Christian Law section that this should be done but this is only stated in four other charters and seems to be a sign of great antiquity (see ch. I 3.6).

The exhortation at the end of the charter is unique:

A priest and a deacon shall be resident at Álftamýri and should not fail to give morning praise and prayer for long, dress frequently for masses and take good care of the church good brothers, and do so for the sake of God⁴

This seems to be addressed mainly to the priest and deacon. But if it is they who are to take good care of the church that may suggest that the priest had more say in the running of the church than an ordinary *heimilisprestir*; the word *varðveita* (have charge of, keep safe, safeguard) in the context of churches is in charter language always used for the church owner's responsibility for the church property or the maintenance of the church building.⁵ It is however possible that here it has a more general meaning, for earlier in the charter the frequency and arrangement of masses to be sung at Álftamýri is referred to as *varðveizla*,⁶ *varþveitip vel kirkio* may therefore mean 'perform the rites

¹ Although 'patronage' might be used here, the terms charge and caretaker will be used throughout this discussion to avoid misleading connotations with canon law distinctions for reasons discussed in ch III 34

² Cf Grg I a, 20₁₃ 16

³ [En sva maldage er nu halþr j logretto] - DI I, 371-72

⁴ [prestr oc diacon scal vera heimilis fastr a Altamyre oc lata skommom missa oto songvar oc oratio skryþesc opt j messom oc varþveitip vel kirkio goþer brøþr oc gorit sva lyrer guþs saker] - DI I, 371-72 The phrase *lata skommom missa* + gen. is rare *Skommum* means 'not long' (cf FM VI, 355₁₈, VII, 106₁₁, Alexanderssaga, 429, Saga Olafs konungs ens helga, 712₁) and here this probably refers to not being absent from the church for long

⁵ DI I, 174, 217 18, 265, 275-76, 491-92, DI II, 443-45, DI IV, 101-2, 180-83, ÁB, 32₁₁-3₁, 349. cf Bsk I, 157₁₁, 330₂₆ (ferry) Also legal language, compare But if the man who has charge of a church squanders its money [En ef sa maþr lógar te tra kirkio er hana varþveitir ..] - *Konungsbók*, Grg I a, 152₅, with If he who owns a church squanders . [En ef sa logar tra er kirkio a .] - *Staðarhólsbók*, Grg II, 19₁₇, Grg III, s v kirkja. Also Grg I a, 819 (= Grg II, 913), 1827, 191, Grg II, 5917 (*varðveizlumadr*), and in narrative texts Maríu saga, xxxiii₄, Mork, 438₁₇; DI V, 265₈₋₉, VII, 277₁₇, SturlK I, 224₂₅ Cf SturlK II, 216₁₃, IF V, 22₁ (*varðveita bu*), ÍF IV, 6₈ (*varðveita hof*), Magnus Már Lárusson 1961e 378

⁶ [En sva scal kirkio varþveita. at þar scal messo syngia hvem helgan dag. oc] - DI I, 371-72

diligently'. There are only two other instances of this usage known to me, the other dating from the 14th century when a priest's *varðveizla* of a church could well mean charge.¹

Apart from reminding us that medieval priests were ordinary human beings who overslept and could not always be bothered to put on the robes when nobody was watching them in church, the uniqueness of this plea and the many unusual features of this charter indicate that there could be much more disparity in early charter making than the bulk of the preserved material would suggest. It suggests that the vast majority of the pre-1300 charters were either made in the late 13th century when we know that episcopal scribes were establishing conventions of charter making, or were altered to conform with such conventions at some stage before they were copied into the existing manuscripts around 1600.

This charter also indicates that there is a possibility that there could be other forms of ownership of churches than that of single individuals. There is absolutely no other evidence pointing in this direction, and as the charter itself is far from unambiguous it can only be made to point to the possibility that there were other forms of ownership. It should however not be surprising that there were more differences in the forms of ownership than is suggested in the patchy and mostly late source material, especially as it is well known that many different forms of church ownership existed in the neighbouring countries

Lastly the charters of Stafholt and Staðarhraun, while probably not wholly authentic 12th century documents (see ch. I 3.6), do suggest that extremely wealthy endowments were being made in the middle of the 12th century.

On the whole the scanty 12th century charter material does only a little to illuminate the process of establishment of ministries and the endowment of churches in the 12th century. The inferences that can be drawn may be summed up as follows:

-With the possible exception of Álftamýri the charters indicate clearly that churches were privately owned and that control of ecclesiastical property was to all intents and purposes firmly in the hands of laymen. The bishops probably had the right to be consulted, and may sometimes have been able to use their powers of consecration to put pressure on church owners. In the case of the charter of Húsafell where Bishop Klængr is said to have granted certain burial rights, we cannot know whether he was in any position to deny burial to the church at Húsafell if he had been so inclined or whether he simply had to give his blessing to the church owners' preferred arrangement.

¹ Grg III, 42₁₊, 161₂₂, 322₁₃, 375₉ [prestr sa er wardueitur kirkjuna] all 14th century or more recent manuscripts - the 13th century manuscripts of this text have [prestr sa er tíðir veitur at kirkio] - Grg 1b, 216₁₃, Grg II, 59₄. And *Pals saga* Bsk I, 140₃₁ where a priest has charge of the chancel and clerics at Skalholt

-The foundations for major *staðir* like Stafholt, Melar and possibly Gaulverjabær were being laid as late as the second half of the 12th century. The time range for each of these foundations is quite long, but Steini Þorvarðarson can hardly have made his endowment to Stafholt before 1120 and Magnús Þorláksson his to Melar not much before 1150. As both Melar and Stafholt had quite large ministries, this may either mean that these churches had been responsible for the cure of souls in their respective areas before they were endowed, or that ministerial boundaries were only being formed in the early or mid 12th century. The fate of the tithe-area of Staðarhraun may support the latter alternative. In its earliest charter recording the endowments which were probably made in the 1120s the number of tithe-paying farms is said to be 14, but in an early or mid 15th century charter this number is down to 6 1/2.¹ Such reduction is unusual and as no major changes in the ecclesiastical landscape of the immediate area are known after 1200, it is more likely that the reduction of the tithe-area took place in the 12th century. That is, that the original endowment to Staðarhraun church was made before all the permanent ministries had formed in the region. This, it must be stressed, is not based on firm ground, and there are many other possible explanations for this difference in the size of tithe-area.

- The establishment of a *staðr* at Húsafell, probably in the 1170s or slightly later, and possibly at a similar date at Hítarnes, suggests that by that time stable ministerial boundaries had already formed. Both these rather well endowed churches had very small tithe areas,² and at Húsafell at least we know there was a church but no priest before the establishment of the *staðr* in or before 1178x93.³ This fits well the impression given by the narrative sources that most ministries had been established by the last two decades of the 12th century, but also implies that the process was only just grinding to a halt at that time. There are no similar foundations or endowments known until the beginning of the 14th century.

- The charter of Reykholt shows that the bulk of the landed property of this very rich church had already been donated to it before the beginning of the 13th century, but also that major donations had been made between the writing of the first clause in the

¹ DI IV, 593-94

² There are no high-medieval sources for the tithe areas of these churches but the late medieval evidence suggests that they were very small indeed. In a late 16th century charter collection it is stated that the priest at Hítarnes pays his tithe to the church at Krossholt (DI XV, 614) and this suggests that the church at Hítarnes received no tithes at all. In 1560 the church at Krossholt had fallen into ruin and two farms were then transferred from its tithe-area to Hítarnes's - DI XIII, 523. In 1442 the farm Reyðartell which neighbours Húsafell on its western side belonged to the tithe-area of Kalmannstunga - to the east of Húsafell - (DI IV, 632) which suggests that the church at Húsafell received tithe only from the home-farm, and this was certainly the case in 1553x54 when a charter states explicitly that no farm belonged to the parish of the church at Húsafell - DI XII, 667. Reyðartell was the property of the church at Húsafell and its tithes were transferred to Húsafell in 1504 - DI VII, 737 but it seems to have been abandoned shortly afterwards.

³ HMS I, 294-95 where a miracle takes place at Húsafell in the time of Brandr Þórarinnsson but before there was a priest and before the feast of St Cecilia was legalised - which happened in 1179 - Bsk I, 106, Sturl. I 99

1180s and the second in 1202x23. Although reservations have to be made about the authenticity of the charters of Staðarhraun and Stafholt, they along with the charters of Melar, Húsafell and Álftamýri indicate that the bulk of these churches' wealth was donated in the 12th century, and the respective 14th century charters show that additions in the intervening period were on a comparatively small scale.

-Hítarnes, Staðarhraun, Stafholt, Húsafell, Reykholt and Melar are all in the Borgarfjörður region, and although it is uncertain what relevance should be attached to this, it can hardly be a coincidence that all the datable early charters, along with a significant proportion of the undatable ones, are from this region. It does mean, however, that the inferences drawn above can only be taken to hold for this part of Iceland. Borgarfjörður was one of the regions where power consolidation happened late and it may be that ecclesiastical organisation developed more slowly in such areas than elsewhere.

We shall return to the charters in ch. III 3 4 to consider their significance for changes in control over church property but let us first survey the Old Christian law section for its regulations on churches

III 3.3 *The evidence of legal sources*

The Old Christian law section is the only legal source relevant to the discussion on early church foundations and the formation of ministries. Although earlier ideas on ecclesiastical organisation in the 12th and 13th centuries have to a large extent been based on this source, its value lies to a large extent in what it does *not* contain. While the laws indicate clearly the private nature of church ownership in Iceland they are at the same time the product of considerable advances by the bishops towards tighter regulation over churches and church property

On church building the rule is simply that churches shall remain where they had been consecrated¹ If a church has to be moved, it is to be moved with all its possessions, bones in the cemetery included, and only with the bishop's permission The eventuality that a church may be abolished is however given a chance as the property of a church from which the bones have been removed, is to be transferred to the church to which the bones are moved.² The property of the donors was however protected even if the church was deprived of the right to have services given in it.

¹ Grg Ia, 12, 14, Grg II, 19 Consider also En tale 57

² Grg Ia, 13 On reburial see above ch II 4 2

Property is nowhere to be taken from a church even though services are no longer held there unless the bishop, the landowner and the donor or his heir permit it to be taken away, if they all agree, but otherwise in no circumstances¹

It is likely that this was originally meant to protect the property of churches that were desecrated until they were re-consecrated, but the clause clearly gives landowners and donors the right to veto any transfers of one church's property to another if it did not suit them. It also follows from this that as a church from which the right to give services was taken cannot in any sense but architectural have been a church, a church's property could, for all practical purposes, revert to the donor if it was ruined or desecrated and not re-consecrated, built again or moved elsewhere.

There is considerable regulation on maintenance and rebuilding of churches. If a new church has to be built, because an earlier one burnt down or was irreparably damaged a new one

is to be built where the bishop wishes, and it shall be as large as he wishes and it shall be called what he wishes [i.e. dedicated to which saint] A landowner is required to have such a new church built on his farm, no matter who had the previous one built [within 12 months] The landowner is so to endow the church that on that account the bishop is willing to consecrate the church Then the bishop is to go there to consecrate the church²

Here the bishops are given substantial powers which, it will be argued below, they had not acquired until around 1200. The bishops were required to visit every commune on their itineraries and be available to consecrate churches, chapels and 'song-houses'³ and in that context it is added in three manuscripts that 'if the bishop refuses to do what he is required to do in accordance with law, they may respond by withholding his tithes'⁴ This can hardly be understood as legislation - non-payment of tithe was of course illegal⁵ - this is simply a nod in the direction of reality The conditions for consecrating a church were a matter of agreement between bishop and church-owner, and if there was disagreement the bishop was for all practical purposes in no position to enforce his will, as the examples in *Oddaverja þáttir* clearly indicate (See above ch. III 3.1).⁶

¹ Transl. LEI I, 36 - [hvergi a fe at taka fra kirkio þott típur se fra teknar nema þar er byskvp lofar oc land eigandi oc sa er til gal eþa erfingi hans þar a bravt at taka ef þeir verþa a sattir enn hvergi annars staþar] - Grg I a, 20

² Transl. LEI I, 31-2 - [scal þar kirkio gera er byskop vill oc sva mikla sem hann vill oc þar kirkio kalla er hann vill land eigandi er skyldr at lata gera kirkio a bõ sinvm. hvergi er fyr let gera. Land eigandi a at leggja fe til kirkio sva at byskop vili vigia kirkio fyr þeim sökvm þa scal byskop til fara at vigia þa kirkio] - Grg I a, 14 also Grg II, 1517-24

³ Grg I a, 1911-14

⁴ Transl. LEI I, 199 - [Ei byscop syniar þes sem hann er scylldr til at logum oc mego þeir hallda tiundum hans at moti] - *Staðarholtsbók* - Grg II, 22 *Skálholtsbók* has 'If the bishop refuses a man what he they and their household men may withhold' - Grg III, 20, Also AM 181 4to - Grg III, 32415-3252

⁵ Grg I b, 2092-21115, 21220-2147

⁶ Bsk I, 282-92

On maintenance of churches the *Konungsbók* version has the simple rule that if a church is so dilapidated that services cannot be given in it, the landowner is to have it repaired within two weeks. If a tenant lives on the farm and he cannot reach the landowner he is to have it repaired and claim the costs from the landowner. The landowner is however not obliged to reimburse for more costs than were absolutely necessary, and the tenant then only gets God's thanks for his trouble.¹

The *Staðarhólsbók* version has the same text,² but also adds a clause dealing with the same subject in a somewhat different way.³ This clause also deals with squandering of church property and the priest's board, issues already dealt with in clauses identical to the *Konungsbók* version.⁴ The clause added in *Staðarhólsbók* also has regulations on the minimum service church owners were required to buy, which are found nowhere else. This clause is extremely interesting, amongst other things because it is the only place in the Old Christian law section manuscripts where the expression 'the man who owns a church' [*Sa maðr er kirkio a*] is found. The usual expression is 'the man who has charge of a church' [*Sa maðr er kirkio varðveitir*,⁵ *Sa maðr er varðveizlo kirkionnar a, varðveizlomaðr kirkio*], although expressions like 'the man who holds a church' [*Sa maðr er kirkio heldr*], 'the man who governs a church' [*sa maðr er kirkionnu reþr*]⁶ and 'church-lord' [*kirkju drottinn*]⁷ are also found.⁸ There is no doubt that 'charge' was for practical purposes the same as ownership; the difference was theoretical, but of course very important. Considering himself as being in charge of the church, being its caretaker, the church-owner acknowledged that he held the property as a vassal of God, and was as a consequence answerable to God and his servants for his management of it. That the concept of church-owner is used in the additional clause in *Staðarhólsbók* may suggest either that its author was a realist, or, which is more likely, that the clause predates the distinction between church-owner and caretaker (See below ch. III 3 4). The clause is at any rate not contemporary with the main text of the Old Christian law section as it is preserved, because the greater part of its subject is found in different versions in the main text. It is therefore either earlier or later than the main text, and earlier must be considered more likely as the clause is only found in two of the eleven principal manuscripts, both of which contain several other clauses and sentences considered to be archaic.⁹

¹ Grg Ia, 172-14

² Grg II, 1822-197

³ Grg II, 1912-2023, also in AM 181 4to - Grg III, 31713-31811

⁴ Grg II, 1717-183 as in Grg Ia, 1520-167; Grg II, 181422 as in Grg Ia, 1617-172

⁵ E.g. Grg Ia, 1512, 1827

⁶ E.g. Grg Ia, 1826

⁷ Grg Ib, 22812 15-16 20

⁸ Grg III, s.v. kirkja

⁹ Finnur Jonsson 1920-24 II, 895, Magnús Mar Lárusson 1964b

The author of this clause thought it was conceivable that a church could be owned by a different person from the farm it stood on. He also envisaged that one man could own several churches in which case he was to divide furnishings and property between them as he pleased if the bishop gave permission. It is added that services could be paid for with church property, with the bishop's permission, if the church owner had nothing else.¹ This practice is mentioned nowhere else, and seems to be in contradiction to the general rule that church property could not be alienated in any way, although it is possible that this refers to interest on church property. The main subject of the clause is maintenance of churches, and it contains the same procedures as prescribed in the main text. It adds, however, that if a church-owner does not come and repair a church, and the landowner pays for the repairs the latter will thereby acquire the church. Similarly if the church-owner does not pay for services, but someone else does so the latter acquires the church.² The principle is clearly that whoever maintains services and keeps a church in repair has the right to own the church. The corresponding clause in the main text does not allow for this, and does not in fact consider the possibility that a church and the land it stood on could be owned by different people.

In the additional clause in *Staðarhólsbók* clear distinctions are made between church-owner and land-owner on the one hand and the occupier of a church land [*sa er a lande byr, buande*] and church-owner on the other. The church-owner was to provide wax and pay for at least 10 masses annually, whereas the occupier was to feed the priest and pay for at least three masses annually. In the main text it is not always transparent what relationship the 'occupier' had with the church although most often it seems equivalent to 'caretaker'; the occupier had for instance certain obligations resulting from the church on his land. he was to feed men carrying corpses and it was he who was to bring lawsuits in case of non-payment of the church- and priest's tithe.³ It is often difficult or even impossible to ascertain whether meaningful distinctions are intended, for instance when the caretaker is to pay the priest his fee but the occupier is to feed him.⁴ It is tempting to interpret the distinction as meaningless in the sense that irrespective of whether the occupier was a landowner or tenant he or she was considered to be the caretaker of the church. That makes practical sense as it was simpler to make the tenant responsible for the church and he or she may even have paid rent of the church's portion to the owner. The church owner therefore only needed to be mentioned when he had to act in his capacity as landowner, for instance when major repairs were needed on pre-existing structures like the church, which the tenant must then be considered to have rented in a certain condition. The difference between the main text

¹ Grg II, 19₁₉₋₂₂

² Grg II, 20₄₋₁₀

³ Grg Ia, 8₁₄₋₁₈; Grg Ib, 210₁₈₋₂₁, 217₁₈₋₁₉

⁴ Grg Ib, 210₁₃₋₁₅; Grg Ia, 16₁₇₋₁₇₂

and the added clause in *Staðarhólsbók* may simply be that the former was a better piece of legislation which did away with unnecessary distinctions, and did not have room for naive solutions like deciding ownership of churches on the grounds of contributions to service and repair. The problem of absentee church-ownership was much more easily disposed of by changing the definitions; if a church could no longer be considered a property in the same sense as secular land, livestock or utensils, but something which could only be in someone's care, the actual owner could transfer the care of a church in the same way as he or she transferred the care of a farm to a tenant. If the two different versions indicate something other than a refinement of legal definitions, it may be that church owners had by the beginning of the 13th century improved their position from having to be involved in the running of their churches even if they did not live close to them, to being able to rent them out, the financial benefits from owning a church no doubt being reflected in the rent figure.

The regulation in the additional clause in *Staðarhólsbók*, that the church owner should provide wax for lighting the church also indicates that the expenses involved in owning a church decreased in the course of the 12th and 13th centuries. By the mid 13th century lighting-dues had been introduced, paid by all tithe-payers to their church. The introduction of hay-dues before the beginning of the 14th century also indicates a comparable development; previously it had been the duty of the church owner or caretaker to provide hay for the priest's horse.¹ These developments, while no doubt serving the interest of church owners in the short run, in the long run loosened the ties between church and church owner and strengthened the ties between church and congregation, and probably made claims for ecclesiastical control over church property all the more acceptable

In these developments the slow process of parish formation can be detected, originally it seems churches were considered like any other property, and if we take the clause in *Staðarhólsbók* literally, the minimum requirement was to pay for 13 masses annually and ask the priest 'who is nearest by' [*er þar er næst*] to celebrate legally prescribed offices [*synge logtípur*]. The rather loose definition of the priest's whereabouts suggests that ministries were only loosely defined. A ministry was probably whatever area a priest happened to serve at any particular point in time. By the end of the 12th century the concept of caretaker of a church had been established and a division of churches was in place whereby some churches had priests attached to them and others were annexed to them. It remains to consider in more detail the nature of the private ownership of churches and the question of why generous endowments seem to be restricted to the 12th century and why they seem to cease in the 13th. These

¹ Grg Ia, 1623

issues centre on the import of St Þorlákr's claims to ecclesiastical property, what sort of ecclesiastical control was he campaigning for and how unsuccessful was he?

III 3.4 *Private churches*¹

By the 14th century all parish-churches owned some land, and most dependent churches as well and this was always considered as a minimum insurance for the payment of the priest's fee.² Outside the Western quarter it was a common arrangement that the poorest churches owned as much part in the land as would provide for the upkeep of a priest. In these cases the priest's fixed fee was understood as rent of this hypothetical parcel of land.³ The concept *heimanfylgja* or dowry (as in the Latin *dos*) for donations to a church at its foundation is first accounted for in the 13th century⁴ and from the late 12th century at least the type and amount of property owned by a church had become among the conditions for its consecration.

Around 1183 a complex dispute developed between Bishop Þorlákr and the priest Hǫgni Þormóðarson. It arose because of the marriage of Hǫgni's daughter to a kinsman which the bishop opposed on grounds of consanguinity, but it happened that Hǫgni had built a new church at his farm, Bær (B), which awaited consecration. St Þorlákr wanted Hǫgni to donate the land at Bær itself to the church but Hǫgni would only concede attached holdings (*útlond*). The source discloses that the priest who sang at Bær had previously been paid only 12 ounce units (normal fee for a quarter-church) which suggests that had it been an annex-church before Hǫgni built his new church. The disagreement about the endowment of the church seems therefore to have arisen because Hǫgni wanted to endow his church so that it could support a permanently resident priest. St Þorlákr had to give in, but his insistence may be evidence that the bishops normally tried to secure churches a stake in the farm where they stood.⁵ The source, *Oddaverja þáttr*, claims that the value of the outlying holdings was the same as that of the land at Bær and that suggests that St Þorlákr's demand had its grounds in strategic rather than financial considerations. The question is whether his aims were those *Oddaverja þáttr* indicates; to make Bær a *staðr* which might make his claim to

¹ Stutz 1895, 1913, 1937, 1948, Schalerdick 1986. On Iceland Skovgaard-Petersen 1960, Magnús Már Larússon 1968d, Magnús Stefánsson 1975 72-81, 98-104

² Consider the consecration charters of Ingjaldshvöll (SD) - DI II, 410-11, and Engey (K) - DI III, 338-39

³ A good example is Bolstaðarhlíð in Langidalur (H) [a prestskyld vpp j land oc gjalldi prestu niij merckr j leigu] - DI II, 47. Another version is from Gnúpur in Gnupverjahreppur (A) [a suo mikid j heimalandi sem prestz skyld oc diakna heyrir] - DI II, 662-63

⁴ Magnús Stefánsson 1975 74. E.g. in the B version of *Þorláks saga* - Bsk I, 287²⁶, New Christian law section - NgL V, 23¹⁸

⁵ Bsk I, 285, 287. According to a 14th century charter of Bær the church was served by 2 priests and a deacon and owned 3 nearby farms but no stake in the land of Bær - DI III, 123-24

control the property more easily justifiable or easier to achieve.¹ As we shall see the indications are that *Oddaverja þáttur* was composed in the late 13th century for propaganda purposes in the conflict between Bishop Árni Þorláksson and church-owners over control of church property. There is no particular reason to suspect that the account of the dispute is a fabrication, but the reasons behind it may not have had anything to do with the control of the property

While it is not surprising that in the 12th century the bishops were trying to ensure that churches were sufficiently endowed to secure their future and maintain ministries it is difficult to imagine that churches were from the outset thought capable of owning things. Like other peoples in northern Europe who had little or no experience of Roman institutions or laws the Icelanders were not at home with the idea that things could be owned by impersonal entities or that such phenomena could have a judicial existence. It is likely that the farmers who built churches in the beginning of the 11th century considered them as any other house in their possession set apart only by their function. It is not apparent that the missionary bishops managed to convince church-owners to donate land to their churches; Bishop Hróðólfr who is supposed to have left three monks in Bær² had at least not achieved much in the way of endowments if *Oddaverja þáttur* is to be believed. Bishop Ísleifr (1056-80) seems to have served the church at Skálholt as his private property, his wife Dalla insisted on living on her part of the estate after his death³ and Ari *fróði* states categorically that it was Bishop Gizurr (1082-1118) who donated the land at Skálholt to the church and established it as a cathedral.⁴ It is among the next generation that we begin to get evidence of endowments of churches; according to his descendants it was Sæmundr *fróði* (d. 1133) who established the *staðr* at Oddi (R);⁵ the Vatnsfirðingar claimed that their forefather, Þórðr Þorvaldsson, who was among the greatest chieftains in the country in 1118, established the church at Vatnsfjörður (V)⁶ and Þórðr Bøðvarsson from Garðar (B) claimed that he had more right to inherit the *staðr* in Reykholt (B) because he was a grandson of Þórðr Magnússon than Magnús Pálsson who was in control and was the son of Þórðr's illegitimate nephew, which suggests that the *staðr* was established by Þórðr's father the priest Magnús Þórðarson who was among the chieftains who were ordained in Bishop Gizurr's episcopacy.⁷ As we have seen the charter material indicates that

¹ Magnús Stefánsson 1975: 102

² ÍFI, 65. There is of course no way of showing that the missionary bishops did not manage to secure donations to churches

³ Bysp I, 85

⁴ ÍFI, 22-23

⁵ AB, 31

⁶ AB, 32, ASB XI, 53

⁷ Sturl, 211, ASB XI, 50. The genealogy is like this

<u>Magnús</u>	
Sölví (d. 1129)	Þórðr
Páll (d. 1185) (illegit)	Helga
Magnús (d. 1223)	Þórðr Bøðvarsson (d. 1220)

churches with large tithe areas were still being endowed in the middle of the 12th century whereas towards its end rich endowments are made to churches with small tithe areas indicating that most churches with permanent ministries had been endowed by that time.

The fact that endowments were being made at all shows that by the beginning of the 12th century the Icelanders had mastered the idea that churches could be judicial persons which could own property. Judging from the available evidence it was in that century that most Icelandic churches acquired the basis of their landed wealth. It is likely that the bishops were instrumental in persuading church-owners to endow their churches; it was the only way of ensuring permanency of pastoral care in any given area and can in no way have been painful for the donors. As a result of their endowments the donors could expect episcopal sanction of their tithe-areas and the land they donated became exempt from tithe payments, which was probably a well appreciated incentive. Apart from practical considerations it is likely that many endowments were made primarily for pious and/or charitable reasons;¹ such must surely have been the motives of Steini the priest with his immensely rich endowment of Stafholt (B) wherewith he secured the upkeep of two relatives;² or Porkell Geirason who donated his patrimony at Þykkvibær (VS) to found a house of canons which he himself joined.³ A related concern was the upkeep of the poor; it was common that endowments were made on condition that a kinsman or -woman of the *fundator* be supported by the church and sometimes whole farms were donated to Christ for the sole purpose of maintaining the poor (*kristfê*).⁴ In this issue self-interest and charity cannot be separated; the poor who benefited were not always particularly poor but retired householders who wanted to be financially independent of their heirs,⁵ and if they were poor it was the poor whom the householder would otherwise have had to support. In the case of farms donated to Christ it was the commune which benefited as it was normally its officers who appointed the occupants.⁶ As argued in ch. III 2.3 the maintenance of the poor was a major concern in Icelandic society and endowments of churches provided the means to invest in pensions and poor relief.

Of the benefactors mentioned above, Porkell was without close relatives and the same seems to have been the case with Steini, but where there were heirs - especially

¹ On the right to donate property to churches without consulting heirs and its extension see Hamre 1958a, 1970, Sandvik 1965 23-30, Magnús Már Lárusson 1958c, Jakob Benediktsson 1970a.

² DI I, 179-80, Bsk I, 285

³ Bsk I, 95-96, 106.

⁴ Guðbrandur Jonsson 1953, Áhltsgerð kirkjuveignanfndar, 150-80, Magnus Mar Lárusson 1958g, 1961b, Jakob Benediktsson 1970a, 1976b

⁵ E.g. LS 72, DI III, 303-304

⁶ E.g. [hreppstíorar skolo skípa lannd þat huer misseri ok suo rada huer omagar skolo uera] - DI I 198-99, [[ok sa einn] bua er hreppstíorar lægi leyfi til] - Mald DI I, 200, cf. [sa skal rada skípun a breidabolstad er j kirkiubæ byr] - DI I, 203

where power was to be handed down - it is likely that endowments were made in order to consolidate and not to decrease a family's authority in its area. If prominent chieftains were endowing their churches richly in the beginning of the 12th century and looked like doing well by it, it is reasonable to assume that the practice gathered a momentum of its own and that those who saw themselves as competing for power or aspired to increase their influence felt that they had to do the same as, or better than, their competitors. In ch. IV 3 a hypothesis is proposed which explains the 12th century endowments of churches as a way of tying the idea of a family's authority in an area with a particular place, thereby making possession of the place and not the leadership qualities of the individual the precondition for power. For the present purposes it is enough to note that it is close to unthinkable that early or mid 12th century chieftains would have donated their principal estates to their churches if they had thought they or their descendants would not have had full control over the property as before. It is also interesting that whereas in Norway endowments of churches were divided in two, the *fabrica* (=uppheldis góð) or property allocated for the upkeep of the church-building and the *mensa* (=presttekjal-ur) or property allocated to the maintenance of the priest, endowments to Icelandic churches were made without any such distinctions.¹ This meant that Icelandic church-owners had more discretion in their use of their church property than their Norwegian counterparts and that the Icelandic priests were much more firmly under the heel of church-owners than their Norwegian colleagues.

The problem of how church-owners viewed their ownership of their churches is confounded by problems of dating the relevant sources. *Oddaverja þáttur* in the B and C versions of *Þorláks saga* is the only source for St Þorlákr's claims to ecclesiastical control over church property² and the date and context of its composition is disputed. One alternative is that *Oddaverja þáttur* was composed as a part of the original version of *Þorláks saga* - in the first one or two decades of the 13th century - and that the A version is a shortened version of this original saga. If this is the case we would have to accept *Oddaverja þáttur*'s relation of St Þorlákr's challenge to the church-owners as the account of a contemporary. The other possibility is that *Oddaverja þáttur* was composed for propaganda purposes during Bishop Árni's conflict with church-owners in the late 13th century. In that case the piece becomes primarily a source for late 13th century attitudes although it remains that a view would have to be formed on the source for *Oddaverja þáttur*'s version of events. Apart from the uncertainty about the nature of St Þorlákr's claims it is next to impossible to ascertain whether the laws and the pertinent charters pre- or post-date St Þorlákr's challenge. The laws survive only in mid or late

¹ Sandvik 1965: 30-67, Hamre 1959, 1963b, 1966

² There is a short account of St Þorlákr's claims in *Árna saga* - ÁB, 16-17, but this is obviously related to *Oddaverja þáttur* and seems to be derived from it rather than the other way around.

13th century manuscripts and none of the few charters which are attributable to the 12th century can be dated with enough precision to be useful milestones.

Let us first look at the dating of *Oddaverja þáttur*. The three versions of *Þorláks saga* have not been the subject of a detailed philological study and their relationship is therefore still ambiguous. There is however a consensus that the A version is oldest, written shortly after the translation of St Þorlákr's bones in 1199 and probably before Bishop Páll's death in 1211 and that it is at least in part closely related to a Latin *vita* written around 1200 of which fragments survive. The B version post-dates the death of Sæmundr Jónsson in 1222 and the C version a miracle which took place in 1325.¹ There are clear textual differences between the A and B version and it has been suggested that the B version is a reworking of the A version.² But it has also been shown that the A version abridges the material found in the Latin fragments and the B version is much closer to the Latin text.³ The possibility therefore arises that the Latin *vita* - of which only fragments survive - contained the material which is now found in *Oddaverja þáttur* and the stylistic differences between the *þáttur* and the A version therefore arise because they are different adaptations. To a layman like the present author it seems however that the stylistic differences are too profound to be explained by different translators; while the A version is a tightly knit description of the course of the saint's life using exempla to illustrate the saintly qualities of Þorlákr and clearly modelled on European hagiographies,⁴ *Oddaverja þáttur* is a dramatic narrative in conventional saga style. One striking difference is that whereas the A version is characterised by its many Bible quotations⁵ there are none in *Oddaverja þáttur* as far as I can see.

Even if *Oddaverja þáttur* fused more smoothly with the rest of the saga there would be reasons to be suspicious of its account of St Þorlákr's claim to church property. The first objection is that the saint's dramatic clashes with Jón Loptsson over the control of his churches and over his affair with Þorlákr's sister are not mentioned in any other source. While the silence of other sources is of course not conclusive evidence it is strange that while St Þorlákr's forceful stance against Hogni in Bær merited a deferential mention in *Prestsaga Guðmundar* his alleged conflicts with Jón Loptsson - and hotter news can hardly be imagined if *Oddaverja þáttur* is to be believed - go unnoticed. Stranger still is that in the five archiepiscopal letters which survive from Þorlákr's episcopacy there is not a breath on control over church-property but plenty on

¹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1958, Jon Helgason 1976, Jon Helgason ed. 1950, Sverrir Tómasson 1988a: 357-59, IBS 1, 474-77. A diplomatic edition of all versions is in Bysp 2 but the introduction has not been printed.

² Jon Boðvarsson 1968.

³ Jakob Benediktsson 1969a: 103-104.

⁴ Astås 1994: 74.

⁵ Astås 1994.

other reforming interests, on which there is, furthermore, good independent evidence that Þorlákr worked towards (see ch. III 4.3).

The other main objection is to the significance of St Þorlákr's claims as they are portrayed by the *þáttir*. According to it St Þorlákr claimed that the bishops should have power (*vald*) over all *staðir*/churches and church property and when he was given power over Svínafell (A) he handed it back to the owner as a fief for the time being (*lén um stundar sakir*) and the owner of Rauðilækur (A) gave the control of his church (*kirkjuforráð*) to the bishop.¹ It is far from clear what sort of power over church property is involved here but from the terminology used it seems clear that the author did not consider that St Þorlákr's claims were essentially different from those put forward by Bishop Árni a century later. Modern scholars have also interpreted the claims as the same, thinking - like the author of *Oddaverja þáttir* no doubt did - that St Þorlákr claimed control over church property initially with some success but ultimately with abject failure and that the matter was not raised again until Bishop Árni took up the cause in 1270. While scholars agree that St Þorlákr and Bishop Árni had the same aim they disagree about what their claim entailed; most Icelandic scholars approaching the subject from the better sourced times of Bishop Árni think that St Þorlákr was pushing for absolute control over church property² whereas foreign scholars tend to approach the subject from the point of view of 12th century Canon law and think that both were trying to establish lay patronage of churches instead of lay ownership. Magnús Stefánsson thinks that St Þorlákr's aim was to abolish heritable charge of church property and ultimately to gain absolute control over it.³ Conversely Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, who has written the only monograph on the subject, interprets the saint's aim as to establish lay patronage in place of outright ownership. In essence this meant that severe limitations were put on the caretaker's rights over the property while he or she nevertheless continued to control it.⁴

There is no ambiguity about Bishop Árni's claim and he puts it clearly in his New Christian law section from 1275.

The bishop shall control the churches and all their property and tithes and all donations which men give legally to God and his saints to help their soul, because laymen can have no power over such things except as bishops ordain. The bishop shall appoint priests and clerics to churches as the charters determine. Men shall build their churches to [the glory of] God but not for their own profit or any kind of dominion.⁵

¹ Bsk I, 281

² Magnús Már Larusson 1968d 465-66. Jón Jóhannesson 1956 217 appreciates that St Þorlákr was only attempting to introduce *ius patronatus* but does not seem to realise that this meant only lay patronage and was a very different claim from Bishop Árni's - Jón Jóhannesson 1956 220

³ Magnús Stefánsson 1975 100.

⁴ Skovgaard-Petersen 1960 258-60, 290. Björn Þorsteinsson 1978 204 seems to realise the difference

⁵ [Byseop vart skal kirkjom raða oc sua allom eignom þeirra sua oc triondom oc tilgiotom þeim sem menn gefa guði oc hans helgom monnom logliga ser til salo hialpar þvi at ecki valld mego leic menn yfir

There is no talk here of lay patronage, in the sense of acknowledging the right of the *fundatores* to oversee the management of their endowments. If laymen were given the power to manage church property it was entirely at the discretion of the bishop and not because the layman had any sort of right to the property in question. Nobody has suggested that it was this that St Þorlákr was claiming and as we shall see the church was in the late 12th century content with much less direct control over ecclesiastical property.

To appreciate the meaning of St Þorlákr's claims it is necessary to look at the situation in Norway and see what sort of claims Archbishop Eysteinn was likely to ask St Þorlákr to promote. It appears that following the establishment of the metropolitan see in Niðarós in 1153 the Norwegian kings formally gave up their right of selecting bishops and this is reiterated by King Magnús (1164-84) in his letter of privileges to the Norwegian church.¹ It does not seem that the Norwegian church tried to exercise this privilege until Archbishop Eiríkr resurrected it in 1190 as the grounds for his claim to control over churches.² What he claimed exactly is unclear and it has been argued that his demands were restricted to the most prominent churches in the bishopric of Niðarós and did not include the rest of the archdiocese.³ For our purposes it is sufficient to note that there are no signs of any dispute between king and church in Norway over the control of churches, or over its other side, the investiture of ecclesiastical offices, until Archbishop Eiríkr clashed with King Sverrir in 1190, a decade *after* St Þorlákr is supposed to have made his attempt.⁴

The only possible source for the agenda of Archbishop Eysteinn in the matter of control over churches is the first canon in the so-called *Canones Nidarosiensis*. The date and purpose of this document has long been debated; the dating suggestions range from the early 1150s to the mid 1180s and it may be a synodal decree or a draft for such a decree never ratified or an excerpt from a more formal document.⁵ Few now believe that the *Canones* are earlier than 1163, when the papal legate Stephanus visited Norway,⁶ and whatever the case may be about their *terminus ante quem* it is clear that they represent the agenda of the reforming church in Norway in the late 12th century and they are our only guide to what Archbishop Eysteinn can possibly have asked St Þorlákr to implement in 1178

slicom lutvm eiga vtan byscopa skipan Presta oc lærþa menn scal byscop til kirkna scipa sva sem maldagar standa til . Guði scal hværr maðr kirkio gera en eigi stialvm ser til afla æða nockorra forræpa] - NgL V, 23

¹ Lat.dok, 63, En tale, 14-15 Kolsrud 1958 186-202, Helle 1964 27-32

² Skánland 1969 81-82, On King Sverrir's and Archbishop Eiríkr's struggle see Kolsrud 1958 223-33 Helle 1964 58-61, Gunnes 1971 197-203, Lunden 1976 81-100

³ Sv, 122-23, Bagge 1976a 26-47

⁴ In two of his letters to Archbishop Eysteinn Pope Alexander III (1159-81) forbids lay investiture - Lat.dok, 79, but there is no evidence for any consequent actions

⁵ Gunnes 1971 118-22, Sandaaker 1988

⁶ On this visit see Bull 1915, Helle 1964 36-44

The first canon is based entirely on Gratian's *Decretum* and can be summarised thus:

§1 requires lay patrons to see to it that the priest does not squander the church's property (from C. 16 q. 7 c. 31).

§2 decrees that patrons cannot use the church's property as their own and they have to present the priest of their choice to the bishop before instating him (from C. 16 q. 7 c. 31)

§3 decrees that if patrons become impoverished they can only be supported by their endowment if it is a monastery or a chapter-church (from C. 16 q. 7 c. 30).

§4 decrees that patrons shall manage church property with the bishop's consent, but if they contest his authority it is left to him whether he lets the matter rest or has the relics removed (from C. 16 q. 7 c. 34, 35)

§5 decrees that if heirs to a church dispute over its control the bishop is to have the relics removed and the church closed until a priest is appointed with everyone's consent and the bishop's approval (from C. 16 q. 7 c. 34, 35).¹

These provisions are clearly in the spirit of *ius patronatus*, the doctrine of lay patronage which had been worked out by the canonist Rufinus and Pope Alexander III in the 1150s and 1160s.² The aim was to get church owners to acknowledge that they did not own their churches outright but were only their patrons or caretakers on behalf of God. The patrons still had the *proprium ius* but their ability to exercise this right was limited to the *ius presentandi*, the advowson or the presenting of a priest to the bishop for approval.³ The doctrine was of course worked out on the basis that once appointed the priest would control the stipend that came with his church and thus the direct influence of the patron would be done away with except when a new priest had to be appointed. As we shall see below it did not work out like that in Iceland.

There is nothing in *Oddaverja þáttur* which allows us to ascertain whether it was these clauses St Þorlákr attempted to implement, except the information, echoed in *Árna saga*, that when Sigurðr Ormsson in Svínafell had given in to his demands he gave the church there back to Sigurðr as a fief (*lén*).⁴ *Oddaverja þáttur* claims that this was to be only a temporary arrangement while *Árna saga* sees it as the root of the 'custom whereby chieftains in Austfirðir appointed to the bishops' *staðir* up until [the time of] Bishop Árni.⁵ The simplest explanation is of course that the granting of the church as a fief by the bishop to the owner was the whole object of the exercise and that St Þorlákr

¹ Lat dok, 43, Skanland 1969 67-73, 187-88

² Addleshaw 1956 17-18

³ Skanland 1969 75-76

⁴ Bsk I, 281. AB 16-17

⁵ [vande ad höfðingjar] Austfirðrum skipudu staðe biskopa allt til Arna biskops] - ÁB, 17

never aimed to achieve more than a formal recognition by the church-owners that they held their churches of a higher authority.

If this was so it tells us that before St Þorlákr church ownership was absolute but it also allows us to reconsider the significance of some of the charters as well as putting his achievements in a new light. The only two charters which can be dated to the second half of the 12th century both contain clauses on the control of the property. The charter of Húsafell (B) gives the control of the *staðr* to its founder and his sons but if they were to leave or did not have heirs the bishop of Skálholt was to select a suitable man from their kin group. In his charter for the house of canons in Helgafell (SD) the founder names two men whom he wants to succeed him as abbot, but in case that does not happen he wants them to control the property and take an abbot who should preferably be from his kin group, if at all possible, with the bishop's supervision.¹

Traditional scholarship would have it that it was this kind of inheritance of church property which St Þorlákr campaigned against² but it will be argued here that it was this he campaigned *for*. If church-owners had previously not recognised any infringement of their proprietary rights the ultimate authority of the bishop ceded in these charters was a major achievement. The other concerns of the bishops expressed in the charters also suggests that making the control of church property compulsorily heritable was an improvement on the earlier situation.

The charter of Húsafell quoted above ends with an insurance clause: 'He who has charge of the church property is responsible for the church and all its equipment in case of fire or any kind of damage.'³ This is the responsibility also asserted in the Old Christian law section that the landowner rebuild a church which is damaged by fire or otherwise⁴ and having it accepted must have been a major victory for the bishops. An almost identical clause to the one in the Húsafell charter is found in a charter of Saurbær (B)⁵ and three other charters have an insurance clause where the responsibility is put on the householder.⁶ One of these, the charter of Hjørsey (B) is later than 1199 as the church is dedicated to St Þorlákr and it may be that allocating the charge of the church to the householder, who might be a tenant, is a relatively late development as was discussed in ch. III 3.3. The significance of the insurance clauses in these three charters

¹ DI I, 217-18, 282. A translation of both texts is given in ch. III 3.2. Similar provisions are found in one other charter, from Hítarnes (B) - DI I, 275-76.

² Magnus Stefánsson 1975: 100.

³ [En sa skal abyrgjasc kirkio oc buning hennar allan við elde oc ollom scopom er kirkio te varþveitur] - DI I, 217-18.

⁴ Grg 1a, 1328-14r.

⁵ [Sa skal abyrgjasc circto at hon brenne eigi oc circto te er staþ varþveiter] - DI I, 265.

⁶ Skarð in Rangárvellir (R) [Sa er j skarði byr skal abyrgjast kirkio oc hennar te eptir slíku sem biskup vill] - DI I, 355, Bjarnarholn (SD) [bondi sa er þar byr er skýlldur at annast kirkio at aullu.] - DI II, 257, Hjørsey in Mýrar (B) [Sa maþr er byr i hiorseyio skal abyrgjasc kirkio þessa. er helgop er inom sæla thoflacc biscope oc te hennar allt at þat spillacc at engo oc reisa apra kirkio slíca. ef þesse verþr nackvat abyrgesc kirkio þessa at ollo] - DI I, 303-304.

may be that the arrangements differed from the norm of the law in that it was the householder and not the landowner who was responsible, but in the cases of Húsafell and Saurbær, which seem to be somewhat earlier, the inclusion of an insurance clause suggests that an obligation to renew a church was not universally accepted and had to be formally affirmed. A related concern which is reflected in the *Canones Nidarosiensis* as well as the Old Christian law section is the squandering, or selling, of church property.¹ This is also forbidden in the charter of Saurbær as well as in an ancient looking charter from Olfusvatn (Á).² Like the insurance clauses these suggest that some church-owners reserved the right to sell off the property of their churches if it suited them. It is probable that church owners normally intended to rebuild their churches in case of catastrophe and that they had no intention of alienating the property which they had donated, but as long as this was only a voluntary undertaking the system of pastoral care was always liable to be unstable on account of the occasional bankrupt or simply obdurate church owner. It was therefore of great importance to the bishops if they could make the church-owners see that their charge was in fact as much a responsibility as a right. And it was only after achieving a widespread recognition among church owners that they held their churches as fiefs that the bishops can possibly have had these responsibilities accepted as law. If it was St Þorlákr who introduced *ius patronatus* in Iceland the fruits of his labours are visible in the legislation on the relocation and rebuilding of churches, the squandering of church property and the handling of fire in a church.³

Oddaverja þáttur adds to the sense that St Þorlákr's claims were novel and revolutionary by making him meet fierce resistance and having to abandon his campaign after only a single season. *Oddaverja þáttur* and *Árna saga* agree that St Þorlákr had in his first summer as bishop in Iceland (1179) visited the Eastern quarter and after overcoming the resistance of the chieftain Sígurðr Ormsson in Svínafell (A) and his father Ormr in Rauðilækur (A), he acquired control over all churches east of Hjørleifshofði (VS) except Þvottá and Hallormsstaður.⁴ Hjørleifshofði seems to have been the eastern limit of the Oddaverjar's sphere of power at this time⁵ and on his way back, *Oddaverja þáttur* explains, St Þorlákr encountered their chieftain Jón Loptsson at his estate in Hofðabrekka (VS). Jón flatly refused to yield to St Þorlákr's demands and the saint had to give in. After this defeat we are told that all followed Jón's lead and

¹ Gr 1a, 1520-167

² Saurbær (B) [Sva er mælt vm lond þesse avll er har æro nu talþ at engom skal fra loga at osækio hvargi sëm staþ þann varþvæiter] - DÍ I, 265, Olfusvatn (Á) [skal eigi selia lond þesse nema með ollom gæþom þeim er fylgia at leyte biscops þesse er i scala hollte er] - DÍ I, 270

³ Gr 1a, 1221-14, 1520-1617. The clause in Gr 1a, 2013-16 probably represents an earlier version of the more detailed clause in Gr 1a, 1520-167

⁴ Bsk I, 280-82, ÁB, 16-17

⁵ Cf. Helgi Þorláksson 1989a, 129-32

after Archbishop Eysteinn went in to exile in England in 1180 St Þorlákr had no support to continue his campaign.¹

This does not of course explain why St Þorlákr did not continue his struggle after Archbishop Eysteinn returned to Norway in 1183 and it certainly does not explain how the saint got his hands on Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (R) and why he gave it to his nephew, the Oddaverjar chieftain Ormr Jónsson who, although a deacon, can hardly be considered as a man of the church.² The source for this, *Prestssaga Guðmundar*, calls Breiðabólstaður the best estate over which St Þorlákr had control which may suggest that its author thought the saint had control over a number of places like that. In *Árna saga* there is furthermore the information that in the 1280s people thought that Holt in Öundurarfjörður (V) had been under the control of the bishops in Skálholt since the days of St Þorlákr.³ Both Breiðabólstaður and Holt are in parts of the country where St Þorlákr is supposed to have had no success if *Oddaverja þáttur* is to be believed and if we take the charters of Húsafell, Helgafell, Hítarnes and Saurbær as evidence for the successful implementation of policies which can realistically be attributed to the period, it appears that St Þorlákr was in fact quite successful in all parts of his diocese.

The charter of Húsafell mentions that Bishop Klængur (1152-76) gave permission for burial and this suggests that the *staðr* was established in his period of office and the terms recorded in the charter are likely to have been agreed on at that occasion, while the charter itself may have been drawn up later. It is of course possible that Bishop Klængur's permission was unconnected with, and predated, the establishment of the *staðr* or that the terms were re-negotiated at some later date at which occasion the charter was drawn up. The possibility that the charter is from Bishop Klængur's time remains and both he and Bishop Brandr (1163-1201) may well have sought to introduce *ius patronatus*; Bishop Brandr was in Norway in the winter 1163-64 when Cardinal Stephanus was there and if the *Canones Nidarosiensis* were drawn up then he was certainly in a good position to acquaint himself with them. Bishop Brandr also claimed authority over church property although his methods were somewhat more direct than St Þorlákr's. In 1190x95 Bishop Brandr removed the heirs of Eyjólfur in Vellir in Svarfaðardalur (E) from the *staðr* there on the grounds that they were incapable (*ekki til þeirra*), probably too young, and installed a caretaker who was apparently not related to Eyjólfur but was married to a relative of Bishop Brandr. Eyjólfur 'had received the *staðr* on the terms that it was heritable'⁴ The phrase used here, *taka handsöllum*, is formal language for legal transfer and can in this context mean that Eyjólfur bought the *staðr* at Vellir with the previous owner renouncing any claim to the property on behalf of his

¹ Bsk I, 284

² Sturl, 172.

³ ÁB, 140, 148-49

⁴ [hafði svo staðinn tekið handsöllum að í erfið skyldi hverta] - Sturl, 174

heirs. It is equally likely however that the church had always been in Eyjólfur's family and that he had like Sigurður Ormsson in Svínafell (A) or Brandr Þórarinnsson in Húsafell (B) received his church from the bishop as a fief with conditions similar to those expressed in the charters of Húsafell and Hítarnes. Both charters acknowledge the right of the bishop to judge if the caretaker was fit and it seems that Brandr was using some such clause as an excuse to install his man in this immensely rich *staðr*. It is not apparent if Bishop Brandr installed his man because he wanted to eradicate familial influence over church property; it may just as well have been because he saw an opportunity to give a protégé a rich benefice. He certainly was not trying to consolidate the church's position in the same sense as Bishop Árni would have understood it eighty years later; Brandr's protégé was a layman and after the sons of Eyjólfur made a rather desperate attempt to recover control of Vellir in 1200 (see. ch. III 4.2) Brandr appointed another layman who was to hold the *staðr* until his death, after which it was to revert to Eyjólfur's heirs.¹ Brandr clearly acknowledged the heir's right to control the *staðr*; what was at stake was not principles but the suitability of caretakers as Bishop Brandr saw it and that probably had more to do with Brandr's own political interests than the ability of the people in question to manage the *staðr*. It may be that shortly before his death Bishop Brandr also got control over another important *staðr*, Moðruvellir in Horgárdalur. Þorgrímr *alíkarl* had been householder there in 1198² but soon after he came from his consecration journey, Bishop Guðmundr appointed Sigurður Ormsson as caretaker of Moðruvellir, probably in 1205³

It is of course perfectly likely that both Bishops Klængur and Brandr were instructed by Archbishop Eysteinn to establish patronage instead of ownership and that both pursued the policy. St Þorlákr may well have made a more concentrated effort in the first year of his episcopacy and it is likely that he met with resistance from the likes of Jón Loftsson. There were no doubt those who felt it too much a gamble to give up the theoretical ownership of their familial estates. The indications are however that this was not nearly as dramatic an affair as *Oddaverja þáttur* makes it out to be and that St Þorlákr was in fact quite successful in establishing *ius patronatus* in Iceland. That this achievement seemed unremarkable and was not even recognised as such a century later is not surprising, by then the concept that church owners were only in charge of their churches and their property was so firmly established that absolute lay ownership had become unthinkable. Instead of being content to campaign for having its rights acknowledged the church now sought to act on them and stamp out any secular influence over ecclesiastical property

¹ Sturl, 175 Eyjólfur Valla-Brandsson - grandson of Eyjólfur - lived at Vellir in 1218 and 1237 - Sturl, 257, 386, and later became abbot of Þverá (1254-93)

² Sturl, 156

³ Sturl 214

Arguments have been presented here suggesting that the writing of *Oddaverja þáttur* must be considerably removed in time from the events it describes. Its author clearly did not understand the difference between the claims of the church in the late 12th century and the claims for absolute control which were beginning to be aired in the middle of the 13th. The arguments that the *þáttur* was written as a propaganda piece in Bishop Árni's struggle against secular church owners in the 1270s or 1280s must remain circumstantial, but its content and objective certainly fit such a context best. That *Oddaverja þáttur* portrays Jón Loptsson in particular as a figure of resentment may be because he was a famous chieftain whom late 13th century audiences would have recognised, but it may also suggest that the *þáttur* was written in the 1270s when Bishop Árni's main opponents were Jón's descendants in Oddi.

So far we have argued that the bishops were in the late 12th century trying to introduce *ius patronatus* and that the laws and the few available charters show that they were on the whole successful. The bishops' main incentive was probably more to get church-owners to recognise their responsibilities than to increase their own immediate influence over the churches. We must understand that before church-owners recognised that they were answerable to a higher authority for their handling of their churches and their property, the system of pastoral care is likely to have been unstable if not chaotic. It was therefore a major victory to be able to ensure the permanence of the churches and the ministries by getting church-owners to accept that they had to rebuild and maintain their churches and that they were not allowed to alienate their property. If, as was suggested in ch. I 3.1.5, the Old Christian law section in *Konungsbók* was written in its present form between 1199 and 1217, that suggests that *ius patronatus* had already by that time become the norm. There may still have been church owners who had never formally recognised that they were only caretakers but they were clearly sufficiently outnumbered by the others for the concepts of constancy of churches and inalienability of ecclesiastical property to be accepted as legal norm. The divergent forms of ownership are on the other hand reflected in the confused terminology for church-owners apparent in the law codes (see ch. III 3.3).

As explained above the doctrine of patronage was devised in Italy where by becoming the patron of his church the owner's influence was limited to presenting a priest to the bishop. This did not work like this in Iceland. The reasons are complex but they have to do with the economic organisation as well as the social position of priests. Iceland had a simple economy which did not produce enough surplus for structures which depended entirely on surplus consumption to develop quickly. This meant that before the 13th century every individual's social position was defined according to his or her function in the procurement of the necessities of life. Everyone belonged to a household and within a household there were only two tiers, the head and the members. There could be great differences within each tier as to respect and influence but this

division remained the most important. The social and political history of the 12th and 13th centuries is about the slow and painful development of a third tier; a small group of overlords and later royal officials who lived off plunder and/or taxes and dues. This development is mirrored within the church; in the 12th century priests were either householders themselves or members of households as district priests and this distinction was far more important for their social status than their ordination (see further in ch. III 5.3). In the second half of the 13th century there began to appear priests who owed their status primarily to being the holders of benefices. These conditions, and the fact that endowments in Iceland were not specific as to their purpose as they were in Norway where endowments were allocated either to the upkeep of the priest or the fabric of the church, meant that it was of paramount importance what kind of property a church was endowed with. The other important factor was that the economic organisation was such that a smaller product making unit than the household was not thinkable. An Italian church might own the yields from a strip of land which was only a part of the land a peasant farmed and would receive those yields. The poorest churches in Iceland on the other hand owned only livestock or rights like pasture. The yields from such property would not in themselves constitute either easily exchangeable commodities or the necessary foodstuffs to sustain an individual. The yields of such property had to be assimilated by the household, put to whatever use it had for them and then transformed into different types of consumables according to the needs of the church or its priest. Thus the charter material suggests that churches which owned less than an independently farmable land received income from their property as rent in whatever form the farm had available and the church might need at any one time. When this was the case it was the householder, the production manager, who decided what commodities could be spared for the church and the priest.

In this kind of system priests could not exist independently of the basic production unit, the household, and if they were not householders themselves they were in every aspect subordinate to their householder. It is for this reason that the term caretaker has been preferred here instead of patron; the patron owned only the advowson and was, in theory at least, not involved in the running of his or her church in other ways, while in Iceland a caretaker managed the church's property as an integral part of his household's economy and remained the priest's superior. The caretaker's influence was therefore not diminished even if he or she admitted to not being the absolute owner of the church's property. It is for this reason that the concept of *staðr* became so important in Iceland.

A *staðr* was a church which owned a large enough part of the estate where it was situated to support a household. In most cases this was the whole homestead (*heimaland*) where the church stood but when the farm was very large the church could

be called a *staðr* even if it owned only a part (usually half).¹ The deciding criterion was that the church had to own the land on which it was situated; if the church owned no part of the land where it stood and even if it owned a number of farms elsewhere it was not a *staðr*. This suggests that there was a strong link between a church and the household for which it had originally been built;² it does not seem that a priest could take over the charge of a church even if he was economically independent of the head of the household with which the church was associated, for instance by being himself the head of a household on one of the church's farms.³ The charge belonged to the head of the household where the church was situated and as long as the church did not own all the land and livestock from which the household lived the church and its property would be managed by the householder as an integral part of his household. Such a household was basically the private concern of its head and the interests of the church would always come second. It was only when the church owned all the land from which the household lived, i.e. was a *staðr*, and when its head became his or her own church's vassal, that pressure could be put upon the householder to put the church's interests first.

We can only speculate why church-owners in the early and mid 12th century commonly chose to donate the homestead and why others were less generous. It is likely that it had something to do with the relative wealth of the donors. One would presumably only donate the homestead to a church if he or she owned other assets which could be sold or given away. It is likely that a pious *fundator* like Steini in Stafholt donated everything they owned, but men of chieftainly rank like Sæmundr *fróði* in Oddi or Magnús Þórðarson in Reykholt had the futures of sons and daughters to think about and no doubt kept a number of assets separate from the endowment. Even if the principle of *inalienation* had not been established as law it is likely that endowments were made with the intent to keep them intact, whatever the practice then turned out to be.

In the late 12th century we have then St Þorlákr and the priest Hǫgni in Bær disputing about the endowment of the church there. St Þorlákr insisted on the church getting the homestead at Bær while Hǫgni was only prepared to donate attached holdings (*útlönd*). This has traditionally been interpreted as evidence that St Þorlákr intended to wrench control over Bær from Hǫgni as soon as it had been established as a

¹ Like Staðarhóll in Saurbær (SD) - Sturl. 182, Staður in Reynnes (Sk) - Sturl. 743, DI II, 300-302. Bakki in Hrutaljarður (SD) - DI II, 277-78, Hrafnagil in Eyjaljarður (E) - LS, 107, Tjorn in Svarfaðardalur (E) DI III, 387, DI IV, 393, DI V, 259

² Consider the clause in *Grágás* which allows a man who builds himself a church to refuse burial to others 'even if it is a burial church' until he himself, his wife or children have been buried there. It is then added that if he allows anyone else to be buried there, he is henceforth obliged to accept all other corpses - Grg II, 8, Grg III, 302. Other evidence is not as clear but it seems that the attachment between family household and its church was usually very strong

³ An eventuality which is not attested in our period but is known in early modern times.

staðr in the same way as Bishop Árni would enjoy doing a century later.¹ It has been argued here that it is anachronistic to attribute any such aims to St Þorlákr; there is nothing to suggest that he wanted to replace Hogni as caretaker but he may have wanted to get a more direct influence over him, influence which he could only gain if Hogni became a vassal of his own church. Another consideration St Þorlákr might have had was that even if the attached holdings put together had the same value as the homestead, the latter was a far more important asset and a better guarantee for the perpetual good of the church and the ministry attached to it. While most of St Þorlákr's dealings with church-owners seem to have aimed to establish the hereditary caretaker-right of the founder's family, he did somehow himself obtain the advowson of the *staðr* at Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (R) and it has been mentioned that either Bishop Brandr or Bishop Guðmundr acquired the advowson of Moðruvellir in Horgárdalur (E). *Oddaverja þátr* mentions that St Þorlákr was unhappy with the appointment of Eyjólfur Þorgeirsson as caretaker of Stafholt in Borgarfjörður. The *fundator*, Steini the priest, had apparently not made arrangements for the control over the *staðr* after his day and the men of the region had installed Eyjólfur there without consulting the bishop. It is likely that the bishops claimed control over such *staðir*; they had no reason to tolerate an unregulated right of advowson, but when they appointed a caretaker they always seem to have been laymen (Ormr Jónsson in Breiðabólstaður (R); Sigurðr Ormsson in Moðruvellir (E)) and whether it was the original intention or not these *staðir* tended to become the hereditary possession of the family of the original caretaker (Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (R); Kirkjubær in Síða (VS)).

It has been argued that as a result of St Þorlákr's supposed campaign for control over church property church-owners ceased to donate land to their churches in the 13th century.² It is certainly true that the available sources indicate that the endowments of *staðir* were slowing down in the late 12th century (as above ch. III 3 2) but it must be remembered that the evidence is patchy at best and mostly confined to one part of the country (Borgarfjörður). The let-up in endowments may to some extent be explained by the diminishing returns from such donations because of the increasing density of ministries. While Steini the priest seems to have secured a huge tithe-area for his church with his generous endowment in the middle of the 12th century the *fundatores* of the *staðir* at Húsafell and Hítarnes only acquired very small tithe-areas by their initiative. It is also not true that there was a complete cessation of endowments; Árni in Tjaldanes established a right to a ministry by a small endowment to his half-church in the first half of the 13th century,³ Jón the priest endowed his half-church at Ingunnarstaðir with the whole homestead and gave the control to the bishop of Skálholt

¹ It is the interpretation of *Oddaverja þátr* itself - also Magnus Stefánsson 1975 102.

² Magnús Stefánsson 1975 102, Helgi Þorláksson 1982b 87-88

³ DI I, 466

which suggests that this happened towards the middle of the 13th century;¹ the chieftain priest Porvaldr Gizurarson bought Viðey in 1224 and established a house of canons there;² farmer Þorbjörn donated half a farm to the church at Skarð so that an independent tithe area and ministry could be established at his church in Búðardalur in 1239x68.³ Except for Viðey these are all small endowments. It is likely that the majority of churches which are known to have had ministries before the 14th century but are not listed in the church inventory, associated with Bishop Páll's counting of churches, are endowments of the 13th century.⁴

It appears then that although there were new endowments of churches in the 13th century they were modest compared to the endowments of the 12th. The main reason seems to be that the pattern of ministries and tithe-areas had become stable and there was therefore little room for large new foundations.

While new foundations got fewer and smaller for understandable reasons it may be a sign of change that donations to already endowed churches seem to have all but dried up in the 13th century. This can be argued by comparing the 12th century charters of Reykholt, Húsafell and Stafholt with 14th century charters of the same churches. In all these cases the original endowments were very generous but there are little or no additional donations until the 14th century. There are three possible explanations for this. One is that as all these churches are in the same region the cessation of donations may have something to do with economic and/or political conditions in Borgarfjörður. This would also hold if we added the charters of Staðarhraun, Hítarnes and Saurbær in Hvalfjarðarströnd which also show the same dearth of donations in the 13th century. Another explanation could be that even if the owners of some of these churches had accepted that they were only caretakers they did not translate the income of their churches (tithes, dues, burial-fees, minor donations) into land or livestock but into something else either to the benefit of the church (improvements on the building, more ornaments and vestments) or for their own personal profit. The main reason behind the increased wealth of churches in the late middle ages was not large donations but

¹ DI I, 266

² Sturl. 288

³ DI II, 117, 635-36, 650-51

⁴ The candidates are: Bessastaðir in Fljótisdalur (A) - DI I, 342 cf. DI IV, 209-12, Mýnes in Eiðabínghá (A) - DI I, 249, Ljotarstaðir in Landeyjar (R) - DI I, 257 cf. DI II, 685, Ey in Landeyjar (R) - DI I, 257 cf. DI III, 263-64, Njarðvík (K) - DI II, 65-66, Heynes in Akranes (B) - DI I, 417-18, DI II, 403-404 cf. DI III, 249-50; Stónás in Hálsasveit 1258 (B) - DI I, 594, Langartoss in Mýrar (B) - DI I, 276-77. Several of the churches listed in the inventory are not known to have had ministries in the 14th century or later and these are likely to have been endowed shortly before 1200: Svínadalur in Skaftartunga (VS) - DI II, 784, Hliðarendi in Fljotshlíð (R) - DI II, 686, Gegnisholar in Flói (Á) - DI IV, 58, Laugarvatn in Laugardalur (A) - DI XV, 646, Hof in Kjalarnes (K) - AM 263 fol. p. 63, Eyn in Kjalarnes (K) - DI I, 402, DI II, 404, Stón Kröppur in Reykholtisdalur (B) - AM 263 fol. p. 69, Ásgarður in Hvammssveit (SD) - DI II, 633-34. Three churches which are listed in the inventory but seem to have recently acquired ministries in the 13th century which they retained are Akrar in Mýrar 1239x68 (B) - DI I, 596, DI II, 113, Reykjavík in Seltjarnarnes (K) - DI III, 340 and Setberg in Eyrarsveit (SD) - DI II, 257.

payments of debts accumulated by caretakers or benefice-holders to their churches. It was one of the main functions of the bishops to oversee the accounts of the churches regularly and see to it that the caretakers or benefice-holders paid up. The bishops only seem to have begun to do so consistently and meticulously around 1300 when they first began to assemble records on the property of the churches in a systematic manner (see ch. I 3 6). Before this change in episcopal administration they can have had no systematic overview of the finances of the churches in their dioceses and therefore only very limited means of ensuring that the churches got what was due to them. While the caretaker system ensured that churches became permanent institutions and that their endowments were not alienated it could not prevent caretakers from using the income of their churches for their own ends. Stopping this gap was of course one of the main aims of Bishop Árni's campaign for absolute control over churches in the late 13th century. The lack of supervision does not explain however why pious donations should have become more infrequent in the 13th century. Many church-owners may have felt that their forefathers who had made the original endowments had done so on behalf of the family in perpetuity and that as long as they took good care of the church and its property they shared in the good deed. Even if this was a factor - and there is no direct evidence supporting it - this cannot be made to hold for everyone wishing to secure good will in heaven.

The third possible explanation for the let-up in endowments is that it is a symptom of genuine political change. On the one hand the conditions that stimulated endowments in the 12th century may not have applied any longer in the 13th and on the other the *staðir* in particular may have become a too vulnerable type of property for it to be advantageous to establish them any more. This last possibility is the one favoured by earlier scholars who saw the threat to come from the church. It has however been suggested here that the church was not interested in taking over control of the *staðir*, and furthermore that it would not have had the power to do so. There is on the contrary good evidence that the increasingly aggressive secular politics began to threaten the possession of *staðir* around 1200.

It will be argued at more length in ch. IV 3 that the building and endowment of churches with ministries in the late 11th and early 12th centuries was a symptom of power consolidation among a small number of families and that these account for a high number of the *staðir*. Also that in areas where overlordships had been established a second tier of locally influential householders was responsible for the high number of small to middle size endowments, usually not *staðir*. By the beginning of the 13th century there was no longer room to establish new power centres as more and more power lay in the hands of fewer and fewer people. In those sorts of conditions it was not viable for families aspiring to power to attempt to start from scratch; it was much easier to take over already established *staðir*.

The *staðir* were a particularly vulnerable type of property which *ius patronatus* had made even more precarious. The idea of inalienability had probably appealed to the *fundatores* because it ensured that the estate would remain intact and undiminished in the hands of the family. As families were transitory phenomena this could become a danger to the owner when several generations had passed. An example of this is the *staðr* at Reykholt (B) which had probably been established by the priest and chieftain Magnús Þórðarson in the beginning of the 12th century. His grandson Páll Sǫlvason was illegitimate and although this had not been a problem when he took over, or when his son Magnús took over from him in 1185, it became one shortly before 1200. For unknown reasons Magnús was not a very successful chieftain and this prompted the chieftain of the neighbouring Garðamenn, Þórðr Bǫðvarsson, to encroach on his authority. Þórðr argued that as his mother was the granddaughter of the *fundator* he had a greater right to inherit the *staðr* than Magnús who was the son of the illegitimate Páll.¹ This demonstrates one kind of weakness: if the caretaker was politically weak there would always be relatives who could push equally or more valid claims. The second kind of weakness of the *staðir* is demonstrated in the sequel to this dispute. Snorri Sturluson took over the church-farm Borg in Mýrar (B) on the death of his father-in-law in 1202. He did however aspire to greater things and acquired the claim to Reykholt from Þórðr who was his uncle and had already given him half his *goðorð*. He also got the claims of two other descendants of the *fundator* and thus armed made Magnús in Reykholt an offer, probably of the type he could not refuse. The deal they struck was that Snorri was to take over but maintain Magnús and his wife and try to make men of his sons. 'He then became a great chieftain' says Sturla when Snorri had moved to Reykholt.² The second kind of vulnerability of the *staðir* was their attractiveness. Not only were they usually very large estates which were an ideal economic base for an energetic chieftain, but they were also normally centrally and strategically placed in their respective areas and the foci of local loyalties. The *staðir* were therefore obvious points to attack and their ambiguous ownership made them all the more easy to acquire.

It is therefore not surprising that chieftains did not think their money was spent wisely on endowing new *staðir*. Only the very strongest and best organised families managed to keep hold of their *staðir* throughout the 12th and 13th centuries; the Oddaverjar and Svínfellingar are probably the only examples of continuous familial possession of the same *staðr* from the early 12th to the late 13th century.³ Most of the others had begun their rise later and from estates which were only partly owned by the

¹ As above - Sturl, 211

² [Gerðist hann þá hofðingi mikill] - Sturl, 212

³ The Haukdælir are a special case because of their relationship with Skálholt, but of the family estate at Haukadalur (Á) the church owned only one fourth - DI II, 667-68

local church. Of these the Sturlungar are particularly noteworthy for their predatory attitude to other people's *staðir*.

Apart from this point about the particular vulnerability of the *staðir* the political turmoil which made them unsafe possessions also provides the excuse for other potential donors. While it has been shown here that endowments did not in fact cease completely in the 13th century it is reasonable to assume that the endemic conflict of the years 1220-60 did not make favourable conditions for rich endowments. It may also be that towards the end of this period the increased force of the church's demands on control over ecclesiastical property was beginning to be felt

On the basis of *Oddaverja þáttur*'s tale of St Þorlákr's dramatic defeat at the hands of Jón Loptsson in 1180, traditional historiography has constructed a long hiatus in the church's campaign for control over ecclesiastical property which came to an end only when Bishop Árni took up the cause in the 1270s. As we have seen there is no reason to accept *Oddaverja þáttur* on this point; St Þorlákr was only trying to implement *ius patronatus* and the indications are that he was both energetic and successful. There is also no reason to expect that his colleague at Hólar, Bishop Brandr, or his successors at Skálholt, Bishops Páll and Magnús, did not follow the same policy. Their loyalties may have lain closer to their families than St Þorlákr's had but they are nevertheless likely to have sought to increase the authority and power of their office and they can well have been ruthless in claiming the church's rights as long as the victims were not kin or allies. In 1216x26 a verdict was given at the Alþing that the bishop of Skálholt should control the important and immensely wealthy *staðir* at Kirkjubær in Síða (VS). A Benedictine nunnery had been established at Kirkjubær in 1186 but a new abbess was not appointed after the death of abbess Halldóra Eyjólfsdóttir in 1210. With the death in 1217 of Prioress Guðrún and in 1224 of the nuns Halldóra and Þuríðr - both daughters of Gizurr Hallsson - the convent seems to have ceased to function.¹ The convent may have been a private establishment like Helgafell (SD), founded with the provision that the bishop had ultimate responsibility for the property if not the community. When the community ceased to function it was therefore natural for the bishop to seek a verdict on his right of control. Bishop Magnús (1216-37) - brother of the two nuns - must have been behind the verdict and this suggests that he did not let chances of acquiring control over ecclesiastical property go past him. He probably secured the continuation of Kirkjubær as a major ecclesiastical centre. In 1252 there were three priests at the *staðir*² - but like St Þorlákr had done with Breiðabólstaður he handed the charge of the *staðir* to a prominent layman and seems to have sanctioned or at least acquiesced in the transfer of the charge to this man's son in 1235. When the son was outlawed from Síða in 1252 things had

¹ 1A, 125, 127, 184, 186. It is not known for a fact whether these three were at Kirkjubær, it makes most sense that they were but they could in theory have been attached to one of the episcopal sees.

² Sturl. 563.

however changed and Abbot Brandr, acting as officialis, appointed a priest as benefice-holder.¹ Bishop Heinrekr of Hólar was however not as up to date; in 1253 he handed Moðruvellir in Horgárdalur (E) to the chieftain Eyjólfur *ofsi* and Flugumýri to the chieftain Gizurr Þorvaldsson in what were clearly political manoeuvres.² The first datable sign of a harder line on control over ecclesiastical property is a foundation charter for the house of canons in Viðey (K). The house was the private foundation in 1226 of the Haukdælir chieftain Þorvaldr Gizurarson who seems to have headed the community until his death in 1235. The charge was then handed to the priest Styrmir *fróði* Kárason³ who had been in the service of Snorri Sturluson and seems to have represented Snorri's interest in the *staðr*.⁴ Styrmir was called a prior and it was only following his death in 1245 that an abbot was appointed in 1247. It is most likely that the charter which gives the control of the *staðr* in Viðey to the abbot under the supervision of the bishop of Skálholt was composed when the first abbot was installed:

The abbot shall control the *staðr* and the brothers and all the property of the *staðr* under the supervision of the bishop in Skálholt, but the men who have given donations to the *staðr* or their heirs shall not have any say and no control. The right of transfer and the control of the *staðr* shall be as the rule dictates and God's law provides, and not be subject to secular heredity.⁵

The allusion is probably to the provisions Þorvaldr Gizurarson had either made or left unclear, no doubt with the support of his brother Bishop Magnús, and may also refer to established practices at other houses of canons (see below). The language of this charter is unequivocally that of the hard-line church policy of absolute control over church property. It strongly suggests that Bishop Sigvarðr (1238-68) was already advocating it in the 1240s but it seems that he was far more politic about it than his successor Árni Þorláksson. Three charters survive composed by or under the supervision of Bishop Sigvarðr and in none of those is there any mention of control.⁶ None of the churches in question were *staðir* or particularly wealthy and it may be that Sigvarðr limited his claims to more important ecclesiastical centres. It is to his period in office and the first years of Bishop Árni's episcopacy that a small number of charters which state that the control of the property is in the hands of the bishop must belong.⁷ Of these two suggest a more relaxed approach than Bishop Árni contented himself with if his saga is to

¹ Sturl, 566

² Sturl, 570, 610, 628

³ DI I, 513

⁴ Cf Sturl, 288

⁵ [Abote skal lyri stað ræða oc reglv monnom oc ollom staðar leam meðr vmsio biskops þess er j skala höllte er en þeir menn er fe hafa getit til staðarens eða þeirra erfingiar skylv ecki tilkall eiga oc engi forræðe skylv handsöl staðarens oc oll forræð epter því fara sem reglan byðr oc gvðs log standa til en hverla eigi j veralldegar erðir] - DI I, 489-90

⁶ DI I, 592, 594, 596

⁷ Villingaholt in Flói (Á) - DI II, 62-63, Burfell in Grímsnes (Á) - DI II, 63, *Staður in Steingrímsfjörður* (V) - DI II, 261. As discussed in ch. I 3 6 the charters of Staðarhraun (B) and Bakki (B) with similar clauses are probably forgeries from this period

believed. A charter for Bakki in Hrítafjörður (SD) states that the bishop shall control the property but the charge was given to father and son as long as they were capable.¹ This was of course a relatively painless way for church-owners to give up their churches especially after the bishops' claims were beginning to be generally recognised. In a charter for Ingunnarstaðir, which was only a half-church but nevertheless endowed with the whole homestead and therefore technically a *staðir*, Jón the priest was allowed to serve there as long as he wished and receive maintenance from the church. It is then added that the bishop had the right to transfer the property and he alone controlled it and could sell it, spend it or add to it.² It appears that pastor Jón was the donor and that he secured himself lifelong upkeep with his endowment. The uniquely phrased control-clause may suggest that the charter dates from the very early days of claims to absolute episcopal control, when what it meant still needed to be defined.

According to *Árna saga* Bishop Árni had no sooner arrived in Iceland from his consecration journey in 1269 than he began to claim control over churches. In the autumn of 1269 and summer of 1270 he travelled far and wide in the Southern and Eastern quarters and got control over all but two churches in the latter and all the minor ones in the former.³ It was only the owners of the wealthiest *staðir* who resisted Bishop Árni, influential men who had no intention of giving up their familial estates to the church. These seem in many cases to have been owners of churches whose ancestors had never given in an inch to episcopal demands. A struggle ensued which was to last for nearly thirty years. According to *Árna saga* the opposition to Bishop Árni came primarily from the new class of royal officials who were in most cases the old chieftains or their descendants and who based their new powers as much on their holdings in Iceland as on royal favour. The Treaty of Ogvaldsnes in 1297 was a crushing defeat for this class of church-owners; the church got absolute control over all *staðir* which owned more than half of the homestead, i.e. all the wealthiest and most important *staðir*. The church was however not entirely victorious because the owners of lesser churches, churches which owned less than half of the homestead, retained their control.⁴ This compromise was as far as the church ever got, a significant proportion of parish-churches and all annex-churches and chapels remained private property and the bishops of the late middle ages were to encounter serious opposition when they attempted to increase their supervision of lesser churches.⁵ The Treaty of Ogvaldsnes is evidence for the resilience of the private nature of church-ownership in Iceland and it suggests that *Árna saga* probably exaggerates Bishop Árni's initial successes. While ensuring the continuing private ownership of minor churches the treaty also marks the end of a

¹ DI I, 277-78

² DI I, 266

³ ÁB, 14-17

⁴ DI II, 324-25

⁵ Jon Johannesson 1958a, 122-36

power structure which began to develop with the introduction of the tithe two centuries earlier and the beginning of the domination of Icelandic society by the church.

III 3.5 *Origins of the religious houses*¹

Iceland is unusual in that religious houses do not figure at all in the conversion process. The first monasteries were only established after basic ecclesiastical structures, like fixed episcopal sees and the tithe, were in place, more than a century after the conversion. It is also unusual in that very little information is preserved about the religious houses or monastic life; even though a number of works are known by the hands of monks from Þingeyrar and the canons Styrmir *fróði* in Viðey, Gamli and Brandr Jónsson in Pykkvibær, they deal mostly with the outside world and give only a limited insight into monastic attitudes and none into the size or condition of these establishments. More than half of the 95 people known to have taken monastic orders before 1300 were either abbots or priors; 28 were Benedictine monks and 7 Benedictine nuns; 13 canons and 3 indeterminate monastics as well as 3 anchoresses and 1 anchorite.² For many of the abbots in particular we know nothing but the names and the familial background of many of the monastic clergy is unclear although they seem generally to have belonged to the upper echelons of society.

What we can say about the religious houses is that they are conspicuously private in origin, that they were all very small and that their principal function was to be retirement homes for aristocrats.

In the 14th century the monks of Þingeyrar (H) were keen to connect the establishment of their monastery with the northern diocese's first bishop and saint, St Jón. They made a certain Þorkell *trandill*, who is mentioned in *Jóns saga* as a friend of St Jón and who died in Skálholt before 1121³, the *fundator* of the *staðr* 'with the designation that it should be a monastery' and claimed that St Jón consecrated the first church at Þingeyrar.⁴ This is explained in the context that the monastery had owned episcopal tithes from 13 parishes which Bishop Jǫrundr (1267-1313) had taken from it and these, the monks claimed, had been given by St Jón because the original endowment had consisted of nothing more than the homestead at Þingeyrar.

¹ HE IV, 151f, Janus Jónsson 1887; Magnús Jonsson 1914, Jón Johannesson 1956 227-36 Magnus Mar Lárusson 1963g, Jonas Guðlaugsson 1967, Magnús Stelánsson 1975 81-85

² Excluding prehistoric hermits like Ásóllr *alskikk* - ÍF I, 62-65 or Guðrún Ósvílursdóttir in Helgafell (SD) - ÍF V, 228 and Guðniðr Þorbjarnardóttir in Glaumbær (Sk) or Staður in Reynines (Sk) - ÍF IV, 269 Cf Maurer 1874a. 255-56 Also Jesch 1985, 1987

³ Bsk I, 172 (245)

⁴ [. undir því nafni at þar skyldi klaustr vera] - DI III, 494-95

Jóns saga also claims that St Jón laid the foundations to the church and *staðr* at Þingeyrar.¹ This story is supported by one annal which puts the establishment of the monastery at Þingeyrar to 1112.² All the other annals however put it to 1133 or 1134³ and the list of abbots only begins at that date.⁴ This has led some modern scholars to think that between 1112 and 1133 there was a cell at Þingeyrar under the authority of a prior, but most think St Jón only contributed the intention and that nothing happened until Bishop Ketill consecrated Vilmundr Þórólfsson abbot in 1133.⁵ We do not know if the story in *Jóns saga helga* was in Gunnlaugr Leifsson's original version, and even if it was it is likely that from an early date the monks at Þingeyrar were anxious to claim as respectable origins for their monastery as possible. Why they had to implicate Porkell *trandill* in this is unclear, it may of course be that the story has some basis in reality. It is at any rate perfectly plausible that the *staðr* was established during St Jón's episcopacy (1106-21) but there is no reason to stretch the monastery any further back than 1133.

Abbot Vilmundr had been educated at Hólar in St Jón's school⁶ and this is usually taken as further evidence for St Jón's involvement in the establishment. There is however another dimension to this as Vilmundr (d. 1148) appears to have been a local aristocrat; his father Þórólfr Sigmundarson was a chieftain in the Northern quarter and the author of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* suggests that his authority was waning around 1120. The saga depicts him as the senior but yet less influential partner of Bǫðvarr Ásbjarnarson of the Ásbirningar from Skagafjörður.⁷ Þórólfr's other, and probably elder, son Sigmundr was married to a daughter of Hafliði Mátsson in Breiðabólstaður in Vesturhóp (H) and this and the association with Bǫðvarr suggests that Þórólfr was a chieftain in the eastern half of Húnaþing.⁸ The establishment of the monastery at Þingeyrar may therefore have as much to do with the initiative of a local family of power as episcopal encouragement. Our sources are unfortunately not substantial enough to allow us to discern which was the greater influence. A possible second abbot of Þingeyrar, Nikulás Sæmundarson, is completely obscure and his place in the list of abbots may be due to a misunderstanding.⁹ The second or third abbot, Ásgrímr Vestliðason died in 1161 and the author of *Ólaf's saga Tryggvasonar*, Oddr Snorrason,

¹ Bsk I, 171

² IA, 320

³ IA, 59, 113, 321, IA, 252

⁴ DI III, 28, 153, 311

⁵ Magnús Már Lárusson 1963g: 545, 1967c: 46, Magnús Stefánsson 1975: 82-3, Jón Jóhannesson 1956: 228-9, Björn Þorsteinsson 1953: 218-19, Guðmundur Þorsteinsson 1988: 90-91

⁶ Bsk I, 168 (241)

⁷ Sturl, 31

⁸ Luðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 III, 355-59, Þórólfr's grandson, Þórólfr Sigmundarson lived at Moðrutell in Eyjaljörður (E) but he seems to have acquired that estate through his wife, a daughter of Þorsteinn *ranǵlatr* in Grund (d. 1149), it had at least reverted to that family in the 13th century when Jon Eyjólsson (son of Guðrún son of Ólafur in Saurbær (E) son of Þorsteinn) lived there

⁹ HE IV, 30-31. Cf. DI III fn 2

lists him among his sources,¹ which suggests that the literary activity for which Þingeyrar later became famous had started in Ásgrímr's abbacy. It is only with the third or fourth abbot Hreinn Styrmisson (d. 1171) that we enter into better charted waters. Hreinn was of the Gilsbekkingar and the son of Styrmir Hreinsson who had been one of the greatest chieftains in the country in 1118. Like Vilmundur, Hreinn had received his education at Hólar under St Jón² but the only thing we know about his activities before he succeeded Ásgrímr is that he begat a daughter, Valdís, who was married to Magnús Þorláksson in Melar (B).³ Hreinn was married to Hallbera daughter of Hrafn Úlfhéðinsson lawspeaker (1135-38) from Grenjaðarstaður (Þ) and therefore the brother-in-law of Abbot Hallr Hrafnsson of Þverá (d. 1190).⁴ Hreinn was only abbot of Þingeyrar for a few years because in 1166 he became the abbot of a new foundation in Hítardalur (B) where his second cousin was the wife of the *fundator* Þorleifr *beiskaldi*.⁵

Hreinn is an excellent example of a high-placed aristocrat who combined aristocratic family life with an ecclesiastical career. He is likely to have succeeded his father as chieftain of the Gilsbekkingar and must have been around sixty when he became abbot in the early 1160s; for him the abbacy may therefore have been a retirement from the world. His successor Karl Jónsson (d. 1213) is of unknown family but seems to have dedicated his life to the church. He abdicated in 1181 and was succeeded by Kári Rúnólfsson who may have been the son of the priest Rúnólfr son of Bishop Ketill Þorsteinsson of Hólar (1122-45). When Kári died in 1187 Karl returned to Þingeyrar as its abbot and remained so until he abdicated a second time in 1207.⁶ It was during Karl's abbacy that the writers Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson were active. Karl was himself the author of the first part of *Sverris saga* and it seems that in this period the monastery was truly a centre of learning - a pupil of Gunnlaugr's is mentioned⁷ - as well as devotion around 1200 an anchoress as well as a near-holy anchorite are attached to the monastery.⁸ About Karl's successor Þórarinn Sveinsson nothing is known save the dates of accession (1207) and death (d. 1253)⁹ whereas his successor, Vermundur Halldórsson (d. 1279), is known to have at least once been involved in mediation.¹⁰

The pattern at Þingeyrar is repeated at the other monasteries; incredibly little is known about the abbots and only about a third of them can be connected with known

¹ IA, 116, Sturl, 106, SOT, 247, HE I, 212, IV, 31

² Bsk I, 168 (241)

³ Sturl, 92

⁴ IF I, 278, 279

⁵ IA, 117, Sturl, 107

⁶ DI III, 28, IA, 117, 118, 119, 124 Sturl, 107, 117

⁷ Bsk I, 193

⁸ Bsk I, 365, 368, 454, 478

⁹ IA, 123, 133, 181, 191, 329, Sturl, 628

¹⁰ Sturl, 537

families. All those who can are however clearly of aristocratic birth and although all the monasteries seem to have been aristocratic foundations crammed with redundant and elderly aristocrats they also seem to have been quite independent of familial politics.

According to *Hungrvaka* Bishop Magnús Einarsson in Skálholt (1134-48) bought Vestmannaeyjar (R) off the south coast and intended to establish a monastery there but this came to nothing when he died in the fire of Hítardalur in 1148.¹ It was therefore left to Bishop Björn Gilsson at Hólar (1147-62) to make the second foundation. In 1155 he founded a monastery on his ancestral estate Þverá (later Munkaþverá) in Eyjafjörður (E) (see ch. III 4.1).² Its first abbot was a distinguished prelate, Nikulás Bergsson (d. 1159), who had been all the way to Jerusalem and written a travel guide,³ but the second was Bishop Björn's brother and namesake (d. 1181) who was installed by his brother shortly before the bishop's death in 1162.⁴

The next monastery to be established was in Hítardalur (B); it may have been colonised from Þingeyrar as its abbot, Hreinn Styrmisson, came to head this new foundation. Hreinn was a second cousin of the wife of Þorleifr *beiskaldi* (d. 1200), the chieftain and householder in Hítardalur, who we must presume was the founder of the monastery. After Hreinn's death in 1171 it is unclear what came of the foundation. An abbot called Haflíði Þorvaldsson (d. 1201), who was according to one 14th century list of abbots an abbot of Flatey (SD),⁵ is sometimes regarded as the second abbot of Hítardalur but this is far from certain. It is also customary to connect three unattached abbots in the early 13th century to this monastery on the grounds that they must have been consecrated to some specific monastery even if it did not function and they lived elsewhere.⁶ In fact the evidence for this monastic foundation is very insubstantial and it only adds up to a single abbot for a few years in the late 1160s. The fact that Þorleifr *beiskaldi* made this attempt is however important, it is a testimony to the importance major chieftains attached to patronising ecclesiastical institutions in the middle of the 12th century.

In 1168 the wealthy landowner Þorkell Geirason (d. 1187) in Þykkvibær in Álftaver (VS) made a more successful attempt. According to *Þorláks saga* he had no close relatives and gave those who stood to inherit from him enough money so that he was free to donate the rest of his wealth to establish a house of canons on his estate. He asked St Þorlákr, who had been a district priest at nearby Kirkjubær in Síða for some

¹ Bysp I, 102. Björn Sigursson 1955

² IA, 115, 252, 322

³ AII, 12-31, HE IV, 30-31, Hill 1983

⁴ Sturl, 106, 114, IA, 118-180

⁵ DI III, 154. As the monastery in Flatey was moved to Helgafell in 1186 and a place cannot be found for this Haflíði among its abbots this is not an unreasonable assumption. It is however only an assumption.

⁶ DI III, 31, Janus Jónsson 1887: 214-15

years, to come and head the community.¹ St Þorlákr having given his consent, the *staðr* was formally established with the counsel and supervision of Bishop Klængr and the men of the region.² Þorkell then became a canon in his establishment.³

There is no comparable description of the establishment of a community in Flatey (SD) in 1172.⁴ It was presumably a house of canons and is referred to as such when it was moved to Helgafell (SD) in 1184.⁵ Helgafell had been in the hands of important people up to 1181⁶ and it seems that the estate was bought for the house of canons rather than donated by the previous owner although it may have been. A charter survives where an unnamed man resigns the control of the house to Guðmundr, Ólafr and Eyjólfur.⁷ The first abbot of Helgafell was Qgmundr Kálfsson and it is usually assumed that the charter was issued by him. Qgmundr drowned in 1188⁸ which makes a probable time frame for the charter 1184x88. Abbot Qgmundr had been a candidate for the bishopric of Skálholt in 1174⁹ and he may have been abbot of the establishment in Flatey from the outset. It is clear from the charter that its composer had personally owned the *staðr* at Helgafell and was handing it over to the trio on the condition that they run the community. He specified that he wanted his 'seat', the abbacy, to go to either Ólafr or Guðmundr, but in case that did not come to pass he wanted them to control the finances (*hafa fjárráð*) and appoint an abbot, preferably from the issuer's kin if that was possible with the bishop's supervision.

Whether the composer was Qgmundr or not, it is clear that the first head of the community at Helgafell had owned the estate himself and that he felt that he could decide who succeeded him. While acknowledging that the bishop had a right to decide who did not become abbot it seems that the *fundator* could bequeath the *staðr* to whom he pleased and it is implied that a prospective abbot would not necessarily control the finances. We may presume that Guðmundr and Ólafr were kinsmen of the *fundator* and that the succession was not regulated because it was understood that they would appoint other kinsmen in their stead. What is interesting is the apparent division between the ownership of the *staðr* and the headship of the community. It suggests that in the 12th and possibly early 13th century the houses of canons and possibly even the monasteries could be privately owned and that the abbots did not have full authority over the property. We are reminded of the charter of Viðey from 1226x47 which, it was argued

¹ Bsk I, 95 (269), ÍFI, 322, 323

² Bsk I, 95-96 (270)

³ Bsk I, 106

⁴ IA, 117, 323

⁵ IA, 119, Bsk I, 428, Also IA, 254 and IA, 180, 323 which put the establishment of the house of canons in Helgafell to 1185

⁶ Sturl, 89, 99

⁷ DI I, 282. Quoted in part in ch III 3 2. The three men cannot be identified with certainty

⁸ IA, 120, 180, 254, 324, Sturl, 120

⁹ Bsk I, 98 (272)

above, is the earliest sign of the hard stance the church took in the late 13th century on the control over ecclesiastical property. That charter stresses that the abbot has full control over the finances, that donors or their heirs have no right to control and that the succession should be according to the Rule and not secular heredity.¹ There are no other indications as to the ownership of religious houses but these two charters suggest that it is quite possible that the abbots had authority only over the brothers and the worship while the *fundator* or his heirs continued to manage the property. These provisions also suggest that the arrangements at the houses of canons could be quite loose and this may account for a number of abbots who cannot be matched with any known monastery.²

In 1186 a convent was established at Kirkjubær in Síða (VS)³ Kirkjubær had been a distinguished ecclesiastical centre under the aristocratic priest Bjarnhéðinn Sigurðarson in the middle of the 12th century but after his death in 1173 it is not known who controlled it. In 1189 one Halldóra Eyjólfsdóttir was made abbess.⁴ She had presumably headed the community as prioress from the outset and it is possible that she owned the estate. In 1195 she asked Guðmundr Arason who was then a district priest in Vellir in Svarfaðardalur (E) to come to Kirkjubær and lead the community with her (*til forustu með henni*). Guðmundr sought the leave of both bishops to go to Kirkjubær and was granted permission, but changed his mind after his flock in Svarfaðardalur had asked Bishop Brandr to prevent him from going.⁵ It may be that leadership is an exaggeration and that Abbess Halldóra only wanted Guðmundr to be the convent church's priest. After the death in 1210 of Abbess Halldóra a new abbess was not appointed as far as can be seen and by 1250 there do not seem to have been any nuns left. As discussed in the previous chapter the bishop of Skálholt had a verdict declared in 1216x26 that he controlled the *staðr* at Kirkjubær and this also suggests that while Halldóra was abbess she was considered to be the owner.

Sometime around 1200 a monastery was established at Saurbær in Eyjafjorður (E). According to a 14th century list of abbots a Þorkell Skúmsson (d. 1203) was the first abbot at Saurbær.⁶ In 1178-80 when Guðmundr Arason lived in Saurbær the householder there was the chieftain Ólafr Þorsteinsson of the Grundarmenn.⁷

¹ DI I, 489-90. This text is quoted above in ch III 3-4.

² Like Abbot Arnis - ÍF I, 178, Þorsteinn Tumason - Sturl, 114, possibly the same Abbot Þorsteinn (d. 1224) as is mentioned in Bsk I, 366 and IA, 24, 64, 127, 187, Rúnolfr Sighvatsson (d. 1237) - IA, 130, 188 and Lambkár Þorgilsson (d. 1249). As mentioned above 14th century tradition put the last three as "unattached" abbots in Hítardalur - DI III 31 but this is probably only an educated guess. Some of these may have owed their abbacy to Bishop Guðmundr's sometimes unusual actions.

³ IA, 119, 254, 323.

⁴ IA, 120, 180.

⁵ Sturl, 173.

⁶ DI III, 31, Also Bsk I, 147, 486, IA, 122, 181, 324, 477, IFI, 283.

⁷ Sturl, 109, also 50, 124, 126.

According to an annal Ólafr was a canon on his death in 1204¹ and this suggests that Saurbær was a house of canons. The second abbot at Saurbær was Eyjólfur Hallsson (d. 1212) from Grenjaðarstaður (P). Eyjólfur was a priest and a chieftain and was married to Ólafr Þorsteinsson's daughter.² His father had been abbot of Þverá and Eyjólfur seems to have had a reputation as a priest as Guðmundr Arason had asked him in 1201 to put himself forward as a candidate for bishop of Hólar.³ Eyjólfur was consecrated in 1206⁴ and it is simplest to interpret his elevation as an inheritance from his father-in-law. Another 14th century list of abbots makes Þorsteinn Tumason the second abbot of Saurbær and places Eyjólfur in Flatey which is almost certainly a corruption.⁵ Þorsteinn was of the Ásbirningar, an illegitimate brother of Bishop Guðmundr's enemies Kolbeinn and Arnórr. His abbacy is not mentioned in the annals and it seems that the community had ceased to exist already by the 1220s.

Shortly before his death in 1197 the chieftain Jón Loftsson built a church and monastic buildings at Keldur in Rangárvellir (R) and intended to found a monastery. This did not come to pass claims the source, *Oddaverja þáttur*, and according to it the buildings were dismantled after the death of Jón's son Sæmundr in 1222.⁶ A signet has however been found at Keldur bearing the inscription SIG: SUEINONIS: PRI: PAL. PAL has been read as *paludensis*, a translation of Keldur = 'bog', 'marsh', but it can also be read as Pálsson. The question is whether to read PRI as *prioris* or *presbyteri*.⁷ If the former is right it suggests that the monastery was established enough for Sveinn the prior to have a signet made but it is clear that this community was not long-lived.

Keldur was not Jón's family estate but there were probably not many like him who owned additional estates where they could establish their private monasteries when they wanted to retire from the world. The last house of canons to be established in our period is however comparable. The chieftain Þorvaldr Gizurarson of the Haukdælir bought the island Viðey (K) in 1224 and established a house of canons there a year or two later.⁸ This was clearly a retirement plan and Þorvaldr seems to have headed the community until his death in 1235.⁹ It was only then that a prior was appointed¹⁰ and only following his death in 1245¹¹ that an abbot was consecrated. It was probably on that occasion that the charter which we have already considered in some detail was

¹ IA, 122

² Sturl, 50-51, 123-28, 154, 165

³ Sturl, 200

⁴ IA, 122, 181 IA, 62 has it in 1204

⁵ DI III 154

⁶ Bsk I, 293

⁷ Matthías Þorðarson 1909a, Magnús Stefánsson 1975 84

⁸ Sturl, 288, IA, 24, 64, 127, 186, 255, 326, Bsk I, 546

⁹ IA, 129

¹⁰ DI I, 513

¹¹ IA, 131 189, 328, 481

composed. It was no doubt significant for the permanence of the house of canons in Viðey that Þorvaldr had the support of his brother, Bishop Magnús, who issued a letter exhorting farmers in the region to give what they could to the *staðr* in Viðey.¹ That does not seem to have had much effect and in 1226x29 it was decided at the Alþing that each farmer in a large area around Viðey should give one cheese to the *staðr* every autumn.² This seems to have secured the financial well-being of the house of canons in Viðey.

In the late 13th century the convent at Kirkjubær was re-established and a new one founded at Staður in Reynines (Sk) as well as a new house of canons at Moðruvellir in Horgárdalur (E). It was the bishops who initiated these foundations and in that sense they were quite different from the earlier aristocratic foundations and are symptomatic of the changes in the Icelandic church with its new centralised administration.

We have seen here how all the early religious houses were founded by aristocrats. Even Bishop Björn's establishment of Þverá can be considered as such as it was on his family estate. It remains to ask why aristocrats did found religious houses and what function they had for aristocratic society as well as society at large.

It has been suggested that Þorleifr *beiskaldi's* foundation in Hítardalur in 1166 was a pious reaction to the death of Bishop Magnús Einarsson and 82 others by fire in Hítardalur in 1148.³ That may well have influenced Þorleifr but his initiative must be seen in the context of similar foundations in this period; the monastery at Þingeyrar had been established in 1133, followed by Þverá in 1155; Hítardalur came next in 1166, then a house of canons in Þykkvibær in 1168 and another in Flatey in 1172 and a nunnery in Kirkjubær in 1186. It seems that it was in vogue to establish religious houses in the mid and late 12th century and it is simplest to interpret this as a natural inflation of the processes which prompted the endowments of *staðir* in the 12th century; it is not a big step from an endowment like that of Steinn the priest to the church in Stafholt (B) which was to have three priests, a deacon and maintain two incapable persons of Steinn's kin⁴ to that of Helgafell with five canons (*messu söngs menn*), a deacon and subdeacon.⁵ These endowments were probably on a similar scale as regards the property donated but the latter was more ambitious in that it created a community under an abbot and a rule which would be a greater good for the community and a greater monument to the *fundator*. By the mid 12th century when most of the large endowments of churches

¹ DI I, 491-92

² DI I, 496

³ Jon Jóhannesson 1956: 230, - Bysp I, 103-4 (A, 20, 60), 114, 252, 321, Sturl, 81

⁴ DI I, 179-80

⁵ DI I, 282. The *messu söngs menn* (lit. 'mass singers') were the permanent canons, i.e. those who served the church and were supported by the endowment. It was no doubt understood that in general canons would be supported by prebends donated by themselves - as in the charter of Viðey DI I, 489-90

seem already to have taken place it may therefore have been the only way to outdo other householders to establish a religious house. It seems however that the main impetus was a pious one; Þorkell Geirason in Þykkvibær, Ólafur Þorsteinsson in Saurbær, Jón Loptsson in Keldur and Þorvaldur Gizurarson in Viðey all established and joined their religious houses towards the end of their lives, most after long careers as chieftains. They were probably more worried about their souls than their prestige in the world, but so were of course many others who let it suffice to join other religious houses. There could be no greater sign of a chieftain's magnanimity and prestige than to establish his own religious house when he felt that he should retire from the world; the motive was shared by a much larger group but the ability was the privilege of the few. This is one of the situations where piety and prestige go hand in hand and the latter is acquired by showing the former.

Þorláks saga attributes the idea of founding the first house of canons at Þykkvibær to the *fundator* Þorkell Geirason but the saint is supposed to have composed the rule. It is often surmised that as St Þorlákr had studied in Paris he might have been influenced by the Victorines;¹ such influence is commonly argued by Norwegian historians for the archbishops Eysteinn and Eiríkr to provide a connection to the reform movement in Europe² but in the case of St Þorlákr this is only an assumption. The monasteries at Þingeyrar and Þverá presumably followed the Benedictine rule - there is no evidence that the Cistercians ever reached Iceland - and the houses of canons are likely to have followed some form of the Augustinian rule although nothing is in fact known about this until the 14th century.³ Ascribing the rise and success of the canons regular in Iceland to an imported reform movement without any supporting evidence is dubious and unnecessary. It is entirely possible that St Þorlákr got acquainted with the Augustinian rule while he was abroad and brought the idea to Iceland, but there are many other ways by which the idea could be transmitted and it cannot in any case explain the more important problem of why houses of canons became so much more popular than Benedictine monasteries.

The most plausible explanation is that the houses of canons were easier to establish, more likely to succeed and that less was risked if they failed. Or in other words they required less start capital, were more likely to attract the high number of ordained aristocrats in the 12th century and could function as major churches even if no canons joined.

The first point is difficult to prove in Iceland because we know nothing of what was required of the monasteries as opposed to the houses of canons. It is however

¹ Jon Johannesson 1956 214, Magnus Stefánsson 1975 83-84, 96, Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1978 139, Sverrir Tómasson 1988a 23, ÍBS I, 276

² Johnsen 1945b, Kolsrud 1958 205-207, 1962 41, Helle 1964 37, 58, 168, Bagge 1984 3-4 On Victorian influence on Nordic literature see Bekker-Nielsen 1968, 1976

³ IA, 210, 214, 352 See also Gallen 1956c 281, 1956c 454, Magnus Már Lárusson 1963g

supported by analogy with other parts of Europe where the success of the Augustinian canons in the 12th century is partly explainable by their cheapness compared with Benedictine foundations.¹ The houses of canons in both Helgafell and Viðey were endowed to support five and three priests (*messu söngs menn*) respectively as well as two deacons each.² In both charters this is expressed as the minimum and in Helgafell this was the provision in case a house of canons did not become functional. Both charters indicate that the success of the house was conditional on canons joining who donated their own prebends and this may have been the difference between the houses of canons and Benedictine monasteries; the latter were probably not as flexible and needed a more secure financial footing to come into being.

The flexibility of the houses of canons as opposed to the Benedictine monasteries leads to the second and third points; the houses of canons were more likely to succeed because they were easier/cheaper to establish and, being institutions for priests, they may have had a greater appeal to the high number of ordained chieftains and wealthy householders in the 12th century. The contrast between *messu söngs menn* and canons in the two charters suggests that the former were not considered sufficient to constitute a house of canons on their own. They were probably the priests ascribed to the church and the pastoral duties that came with it,³ who could be counted among the canons if the house was successful but who could function independently if it did not. This meant that even if recruitment failed the foundation was still a valuable one which would support a major ecclesiastical centre.

The reasons for the establishment of religious houses seem therefore to have been the pious inclinations of aristocrats and their desire for salvation as much as prestige or local influence. The reason why houses of canons became more popular seems simply to have been that they were easier to establish. Religious houses did however also answer to a social need; the fact that people could just as well become monks, canons and nuns at the episcopal sees as the religious houses⁴ suggests this and there was clearly a number of people who wanted and could afford to devote their lives to God as well as a much larger group who for one reason or other needed to retire from the world.

The former group is probably underrepresented in our sources; people who joined religious houses at an early age and lived there all their lives are not likely to appear in the type of source that survives from the high middle ages in Iceland. It is also difficult to distinguish people like these from the latter group; some may have been installed in religious houses because they were for one reason or another of no use to

¹ Southern 1990 245-47

² DI I, 282, 489-90

³ Helgafell at least had a large tithe-area and several annex churches to service - JJ, 161, PP, 153 as DI II, 673-73

⁴ As in Grg II, 97₁₈₋₉₈₅; Grg III, 43₃₋₈, and 145₁₊₁₉ where the clause is marked as an amendment.

their family or not likely to survive on their own in secular society. We do not know for instance why the scholar monks Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson joined the community at Þingeyrar; religious devotion is only one among several possible explanations. There is also fusion between the two groups in that many of the people who joined religious houses late in their lives had not had the opportunity earlier. This seems to have been the case with the anchoress Úlfrún in Þingeyrar who had had a son before she took the veil but took her seclusion so seriously that she would not let her son see her when he came to visit.¹ The best representative of religious devotion is the anchoress Hildr who lived in a hut attached to the cathedral at Hólar from before St Jón's death in 1121 to her death in 1159. She had come to the see with her grandfather, the priest Hámundr, and had at an early age requested to be allowed to take the veil but had been refused. She then disappeared and made herself a shelter in a nearby uninhabited valley. After she had been found she was ordained as nun and later she instructed virtuous women as well as fostering a poor boy whom she taught to read the Psalter.²

The majority of known people in monastic orders were however aristocrats retiring after active lives in the world. The first monk known to us is the chieftain Þorgils Oddason from Staðarhóll (SD) who had clashed memorably with Hafliði Másson around 1120. In 1150 he handed his estate and chieftaincy over to his sons and became a monk at Þingeyrar where he died the following spring.³ When Bishop Ketill Þorsteinsson of Hólar died in 1145 his widow, Gróa daughter of Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson lived as a nun at Hólar where she died in the time of Bishop Klængr (1151-76).⁴ Some families had close ties with particular monasteries; in 1204 Bishop Guðmundr asked the chieftain Sigurðr Ormsson (d. 1235) to go to Þverá and restore the buildings on the *staðr*. We are told that Sigurðr undertook this gladly because he loved the *staðr* dearly for his father the chieftain Ormr Jónsson had died as a monk there in 1190 and Ormr had been the nephew of Bishop Björn who established it. It was a further incentive that the present abbot, Ormr Skeggjason, was Sigurðr's relative, a nephew of old Ormr.⁵ Sigurðr later became a monk himself, most likely at Þverá.⁶ The fact that the Svínfellingar's core region was on the other side of the country from Þverá suggests that their involvement with the monastery had a personal rather than political significance. Another, more local, family which had close ties with Þverá was that of the chieftain Þorgeirr Hallsson in Hvassafell in Eyjafjörður (E) and his sons. Þorgeirr had been among the greatest chieftains in the country in 1118 but shortly before his

¹ Bsk I, 368, Sturl, 208

² Bsk I, 167 (239), 194-95, 203-207 (254-57) See Carlé 1985a.

³ Sturl, 56

⁴ Bysp I, 92

⁵ Sturl, 210

⁶ Sturl, 49

death in 1169 he became a monk at Þverá.¹ One of Þorgeirr's younger sons, Þórðr, was a monk at Þverá all his life it seems² and Þorgeirr's son and successor as chieftain, Þorvarðr, also became a monk before his death in 1207, presumably at Þverá.³

This pattern was to continue throughout the 12th century and into the 13th but in the middle of that century the evidence for retiring aristocrats begins to get thin partly because in this period the most prominent aristocrats with whom our sources tend to be concerned did not live very long. There are however examples like Klængr Teitsson of the Haukdælir⁴ and Þorsteinn Hjálmsón from Breiðabólstaður in Vesturhóp (H)⁵ which show that the trend continued throughout the 13th century.

The third possible group of people who might have become attached to the religious houses and the sees in the 12th and 13th centuries is boarders (*próventumenn*) or lay people of retirement age who wished to vacate their estates for their heirs but were not interested in taking religious vows. There are numerous examples of such people negotiating their corodies with religious houses in the 14th and 15th centuries, but none from the 12th or 13th. That of course does not mean that the practice was not in place.

That the principal function of the religious houses was to be retirement homes is supported by their unobtrusiveness and independence. They were independent in the sense that no particular families can be shown to have dominated individual houses. The abbots of the same house came from different families and often from other parts of the country. Absolutely nothing is known of how they were selected although it seems that the bishops of Skálholt had the final say about the abbots of the houses of canons in that diocese.⁶ As was pointed out above it is possible that the abbots did not have financial control over their establishments and that this control remained in the hands of the *fundator* or his or her heirs. As long as they did these patrons must have had a say in the appointment of abbots but it does not seem likely that this sort of arrangement survived long into the 13th century as we should then expect to know more about it from indignant reformers.

Very little is known of how large the religious houses were; when Þorvaldr Gizurarson established the house of canons in Viðey there were five canons there;⁷ in 1344 they were six⁸ while in 1403 there were thirteen canons in Þykkvibær and fourteen

¹ Bsk I, 31, 1A, 117 Sturl, 107

² Sturl, 101

³ 1A, 123, 182

⁴ ÁB, 122-23, 146

⁵ LS, 72

⁶ Bsk I, 106, DI I, 282

⁷ Bsk I, 546

⁸ 1A, 352

nuns in Kirkjubær¹ and these seem to have been sort of numbers common in the religious houses. By the middle of the 13th century some of the religious houses had become institutions of considerable strength and it is in them that increasing numbers of men like Brandr Jónsson and Eyjólfur Valla-Brandsson (see ch. III 5.5.2), who had a clear sense of their identity as men of the church, were bred.

¹ IA, 286

III 4. The bishops

III 4.1 *The bishops and family politics*

With Ísleifr's son, Gizurr, becoming bishop in 1082, the domination of the Icelandic church by the Haukdælir was established. Bishop Gizurr seems to have succeeded his father without difficulty. *Hungrvaka* has a story about a priest called Guthormr Finnólfsson from Laugardalur (Á) whom Ísleifr indicated as his successor and who was chosen at the Alþing in the absence of Gizurr. Gizurr had been abroad and came to the country about the time of the Alþing. Knowing that a choice of an electus would be made he waited discreetly at his landing place until he got news that the priest had been chosen and then made his way to the assembly. But when the priest knew that Gizurr was there he announced that there was no chance he would undertake the responsibility as Gizurr was now available. The chieftains and people then turned to Gizurr and only after much pleading and promises of good behaviour did Gizurr agree to seek consecration.¹

The priest in this story is otherwise unknown and the story must be considered in its hagiographic context. Gizurr was in the eyes and pen of *Hungrvaka's* author a true ecclesiastical hero, and in this story we get the motif of the reluctant hero expressed in terms of Christian modesty. It is also likely that the author or somebody before him felt slightly embarrassed by what might be claimed to be simple inheritance of an ecclesiastical office. Whatever the truth behind this story it does not allow us to think that bishops were selected by some kind of communal decision. In fact nothing can be known with certainty about the selection procedures until 1150. Down to that time there never seems to have been a second contestant, and the choice of electus seems to have been mostly in the hands of the preceding bishop, and, after 1106, in the hands of the bishop of the other see. The choice of successor can be shown always to have been influenced, to some degree at least, by familial and/or discipular relationships.²

Gizurr was, like his father, educated in Saxony,³ but all the later bishops, down to St Þorlákr, were educated in Iceland as far as can be established. Ari tells us that many chieftains and good men gave their sons to Ísleifr to be educated, and among these were St Jón, first bishop of Hólar, and Kollr who later became a bishop in

¹ Bysp I, 83-84

² Cf Magnus Mar Larusson 1967c 50-55

³ Bysp I, 83 *Jóns saga helga* adds that it was in Hertford as well - Bsk I, 153, 219

Norway.¹ But unlike his father, Gizurr is not credited with any educational efforts. That responsibility was taken up by Gizurr's brother, Teitr priest in Haukadalur (Á).

Teitr had been fostered by Hallr Þórarinnsson *hinn mildi* in Haukadalur. Hallr was 94 when he died in 1089; he had been in Norway in his twenties and followed St Ólafr but came back to Iceland in 1025 to farm at Haukadalur.² Hallr was probably childless and Teitr seems to have inherited the land from him. Ari *fróði* was fostered by Hallr from the age of seven and was at Haukadalur for 14 years (c. 1075-89), but he also says he was with Teitr at the age of twelve,³ which suggests that Teitr and Hallr lived together at Haukadalur even after Teitr came of age. As opposed to Bishop Gizurr who neither had disciples nor sons who achieved anything,⁴ Teitr had two bishops and Ari *fróði* among his disciples and his son, Hallr, became the family's chieftain and was a bishop elect when he died in 1150. We do not know the particulars of Þorlákr Rúnólfsson's (b. 1087, bishop of Skálholt 1118-33) and Björn Gilsson's (bishop of Hólar 1147-62) relationship with Teitr. The source, *Jón saga helga*, only says that they were nurtured and educated by him.⁵ It seems however safe to assume that their pupilage was more akin to traditional fosterage rather than formal schooling.⁶

Fosterage was a complex institution,⁷ but the aspect of it that matters in this context, is that the foster child was seen to benefit from it both personally (i.e. became a better person) and politically (i.e. an alliance was forged). Whether money was exchanged is besides the point; known fosterers like Teitr, Sæmundr *fróði*, his son Eyjólfur and others, can be safely assumed to have been of the financial standing that they were not taking on boys for the money. The benefits to them were rather political; taking on a boy meant alliance with his kin and when grown up he would be as a son to his foster father and brother to his foster siblings. This was especially significant if the foster child could be helped to positions like bishop or law-speaker, which were politically important without involving familial wealth. The point was of course that the foster child did not inherit from the fosterer but could in all other aspects be expected to behave towards him and his family like a son. The principle of primogeniture being far from well established in Iceland in the 12th century, younger

¹ ÍF I, 20

² ÍF I, 20-21 ÍF XXVII, 420

³ ÍF I, 20-21

⁴ Gizurr had five sons, four of whom died before him, and about the fifth nothing more is known. Bysp I, 89, 92. Gizurr's son Teitr was with him in Norway in 1083, and may have accompanied him on his consecration journey. Teitr Gizurarson was among the Icelandic chieftains who swore that Bishop Ísleif had sworn that King Ólafr Haraldsson had given Icelanders certain rights in Norway - Grg 1b, 197, Jon Johannesson 1956: 141-42, which suggests that he had considerable status, but he seems to have died before he could establish a family of his own. Also ÍF III, 334-42 where he is in Norway in 1093-1103 and lives only a short while after returning to Iceland.

⁵ Bsk I, 153, 219

⁶ Cf. Sverrir Tómasson 1988a: 20-21

⁷ Magnus Már Lárusson 1959

sons of powerful chieftains could not be relied on to forsake their chance of inheritance for ecclesiastical posts which at best wielded limited powers. The powers of bishops, and later on abbots, were nevertheless important to chieftains and it was therefore ideal to have somebody as bishop who could make no financial claim but could be relied upon for support when needed. Whatever the practice, this attitude would explain why so many of the powerful chieftains in the 12th century let it suffice to be priests and spent their lives power-broking in their respective regions and why a large number of bishops and abbots were the sons of penniless men of little consequence but respectable ancestry.

Jón Jóhannesson wondered why Sæmundr *fróði* never became bishop, considering that he was regarded as the most learned man in the country in his time and was influential both in the passing of the tithe-law in 1097 and the writing of the Christian Law Section between 1122 and 1133, and Arn regards him as an equal of the bishops by submitting his first draft of *Íslendingabók* also to him.¹ We cannot of course know the details of the political issues which affected who became bishop and who did not, but the explanation that Sæmundr did not become bishop because he did not want to makes good sense, if he had, he could have been imperilling the position and continuity of his family, the Oddaverjar.

Bishop Gizurr was almost certainly not the eldest son of Bishop Ísleifr. Teitr died before him (d. 1110) and when Gizurr came home from Saxony there seems to have been no room for him in his family's region in the South, since he went to live at his wife's inheritance at Hof in Vopnafjörður (A), suggesting that his brothers Teitr and Þorvaldr had already acquired what wealth and power there was within their family. Gizurr was also a merchant and often sailed abroad,² and thus in every way behaved like a youngest son busily trying to further his and his descendants' chances of power. From the point of view of the only son who outlived him, Gizurr seems to have forsaken these chances by becoming a bishop.

The choice of St Jón as bishop for the new northern diocese seems to have been made by his friends and relatives in the South. It seems unlikely that the men of the North preferred somebody with no connections in their regions. The initiative for the establishment of the see no doubt came from the North,³ but in selecting the man to do the job Bishop Gizurr could not be bypassed. The Archbishop could not be expected to agree to consecrate a bishop to the new see against the wishes of the bishop whose bishopric was being diminished by more than a fourth.

St Jón was a disciple of Bishop Ísleifr, a fact which no doubt influenced his selection. He was also a third cousin of Teitr Ísleifsson's wife, a relationship which

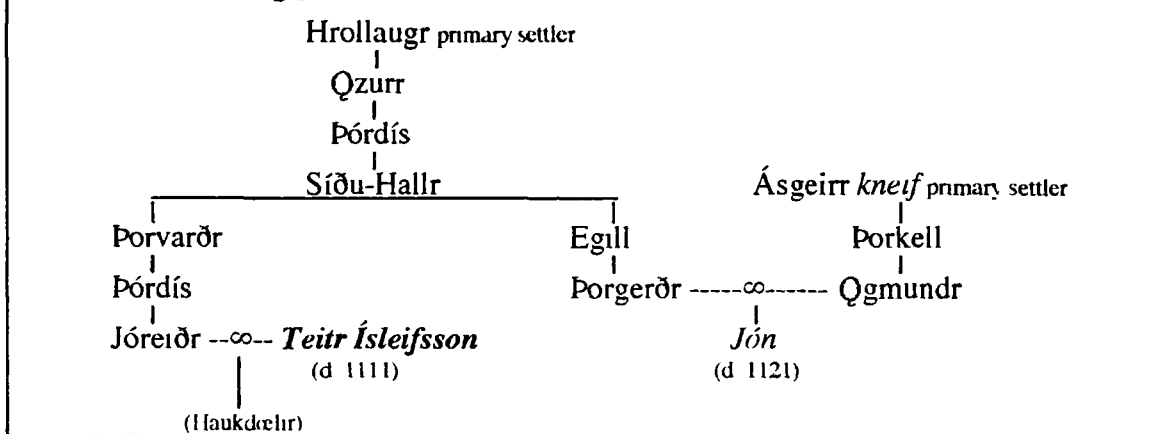
¹ Jon Jóhannesson 1956: 181

² Bysp I, 83

³ Arn says so - IF I, 23

would have been recognised. But unlike many of the later bishops St Jón was a man of good position and if he was not a chieftain it can only have been because he was not interested in it. He was the great grandson of a primary settler,¹ through a direct male line, and his mother was the daughter of one of the sons of Síðu-Hallr, a chieftain from the South-east who was the leader of the Christian side in 1000 and from whom at least six of the twelve Icelandic bishops in the Commonwealth period were descended. St Jón's estate and church, Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (B), was in the area of his great grandfather's land-claim and was, later at least, one of the richest and most important *staðir* in the country. The evidence is circumstantial but it suggests strongly that St Jón was a chieftain of his own family, whose absence in the area can hardly have been regretted by the neighbouring family of the Oddaverjar. It is not known into whose possession Breiðabólstaður came after St Jón moved to

Table 5. St Jón Ögmundarson's lineage



Hólar, but shortly before 1200 it was held by one of the Oddaverjar.²

Why St Jón felt free to leave his patrimony we cannot know; his being childless may partly explain that. He was fifty when he was consecrated, already married to his second wife, and may have given up all hope of an heir. Whatever the reason, any chance of a family of *Breiðbœlingar ceased with St Jón becoming bishop in 1106.

Bishop Gizurr's successor at Skálholt, Þorlákr Rúnólfsson, was a very different type of man from St Jón. There is nothing to suggest that he had either wealth or power coming to him from his immediate family, whereas there is everything to suggest that he owned his career entirely to the Haukdælir. His ancestry was very respectable, he was descended from Ketilbjörn *gamli* like the Haukdælir and from Önuendr *bíldr* like St Jón, and on his mother's side he was of the Reynistaðarmenn from the North.³ He was thus second cousin of his fellow-student and later bishop at Hólar, Björn Gilsson.

¹ Ásgeirr *kneif* On him see Páll Sigurðsson 1886 504-505 The line is curiously short, and one or two generations may be missing - ÍFI 340-342, Bsk I, 151, 216

² Sturl, 172

³ Bysp I, 11 - IFI, 73, 374

slowly grew, careers began to be made within it, without the families having much influence.

Thus we have Ketill Þorsteinsson (b. 1074 d. 1145), a chieftain of the Mǫðruvellingar, one of the oldest and most respectable families in the North, succeeding St Jón as bishop of Hólar in 1122. Ketill was the last chieftain of his line¹ and also the last chieftain to become bishop (although both Páll Jónsson and Magnús Gizurarson had held *godorð* neither were leaders of their respective families). Besides being related to more or less everybody of consequence in the country, he was for instance first cousin of Sæmundr *fróði*,² Ketill was married to Bishop Gizurr's daughter, which no doubt had some influence on his election.

Of Bishop Þorlákr's successor at Skálholt Magnús Einarsson we know very little in terms of connections. It is not known where he got his education, but he was Bishop Þorlákr's first cousin once removed, which is too close a relationship to be a coincidence. Bishop Magnús had splendid ancestry; like Þorlákr he was a distant relative of the Haukdælir and like St Jón he was a descendant of Síðu-Hallr, through a direct male line from Síðu-Hallr's eldest son, which may have constituted a family of power, although nothing is known about chieftaincies in the East in this period.³ Magnús's stepmother, who loved him dearly according to *Hungrvaka*,⁴ was of the rising ecclesiastical family of the Reykhyllingar. Magnús then owed his episcopacy either to his parents' families or to Bishop Þorlákr (or all three), but there is nothing in particular to suggest influence from the Haukdælir although it is difficult to imagine that they were cold-shouldered in the selection process.

Bishop Ketill's successor at Hólar, Björn Gilsson (1147-62), is of uncertain ancestry. His mother was a granddaughter of Þorfinnr *karlsefni* in Staður in Reynines⁵ and her father Björn or Þorbjörn seems to have been of considerable standing; his son Árni was a priest⁶ and his other daughter was married to the chieftain Þorsteinn *ranglátr* at Grund (E) (d. 1149).⁷ It has been suggested that Björn had another son in

¹ Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 III, 520-24. Ketill is called '*hofdingi*' in *Kristni saga*, ASB XI, 51, 53, and as much can be inferred from the story about how he lost his eye, Sturl, 42-43, ÍF X, 105. It is possible that his *godorð* passed to his uncle's descendants if Ketill Guðmundsson and Þorvaldr *auðgi* were the sons of Guðmundr Guðmundsson, but this is nowhere stated, cf. SturlR, 39 *ættskrá*. There is also a chance that his son, the priest and later monk Rúnólftr (d. 1186), was a chieftain since he is counted among many such in the priest list of 1143 - DI I, 186, and it may be him that is called '*gofugr prest*' in v. 43 of *Leidarvísan* - Skjald I, 626. See Finnur Jónsson 1920-24 II, 118, and de Vries 1964-67 II, 61.

² ÍF I, 27, 229.

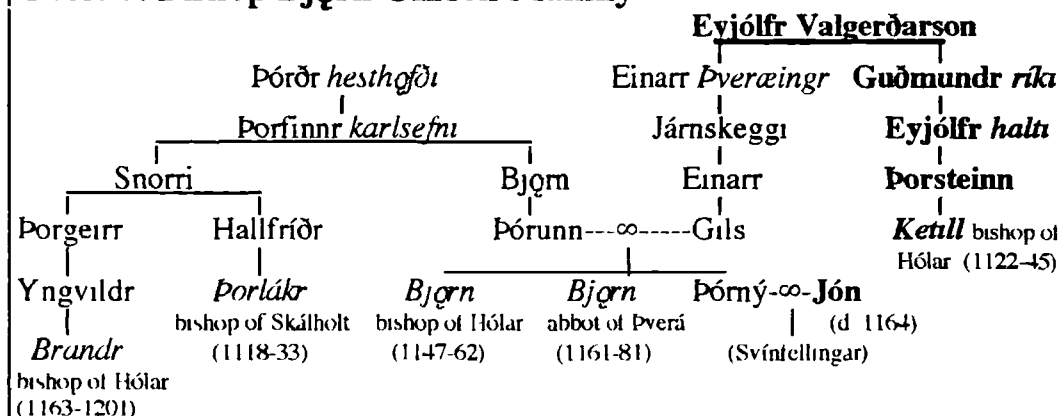
³ Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 II, 74-118 bravely attempts to reconstruct the owners of *godorð* in this region and ascribes one to Bishop Magnus's father, Einarr Magnússon (pp. 83-85) but this must be considered optimistic.

⁴ Bysp I, 99.

⁵ ÍF IV, 236-37.

⁶ Bysp I, 97.

⁷ Sturl, 50.

Table 7. Bishop Björn Gilsson's family

Snorri (d. 1151) father of Grímr in Hof in Hofðastrond (Sk) (d. 1196)¹ and this would allow us to identify Bishop Björn's maternal family as minor chieftains in eastern Skagafjorður. Of Bishop Björn's paternal family we know that he was the maternal uncle of the chieftain Ormr Jónsson of the Svínfellingar² and that Ormr's mother, Þórný, was the daughter of a Gils Einarsson.³ The suggestion that Gils Einarsson was the son of Einarr son of Járnскеggi son of Einarr Þveræingr⁴ has the virtue of explaining why Björn established a monastery at Þverá (E), it would then have been his ancestral estate. This link also places Björn firmly among the most powerful families of Eyjafjorður. Björn had been sent to Teitr Ísleifsson in Haukadalur for education⁵ and later he studied at Hólar under St Jón.⁶ Björn may have remained at Hólar under Bishop Ketill and succeeded to the episcopacy with the support of his many powerful relatives and in-laws in the north and east. If he was not the eldest son of Gils and Þórunn he was apparently the oldest surviving one in 1155 when he established a monastery on his patrimony at Þverá. His family may not have owned a *goðorð* but they were nevertheless of high status as their connections show. Björn is listed among the high-born priests of 1143.⁷ As in St Jón's case, Bishop Björn's family came to an end as a political entity with his elevation to the see of Hólar and when he ordained his brother and namesake as abbot of Þverá in 1181 it seems that the *Þveræingar were finally absorbed into the church.

Like Björn Gilsson, Klængur Þorsteinsson bishop of Skálholt 1152-76 was educated under St Jón at Hólar. His mother placed him there at the age of 12, around 1117,⁸ and he seems to have lived there without interruption until he became bishop of

¹ SturlR II, 35 ættskrá. Luðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 III. 387-89, 396-400.

² Bsk I, 488.

³ Sturl, 48.

⁴ Steinn Dóttir 1939: 39. Brynleitur Tobiasson 1943: 173-74, Luðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 III, 484-91.

⁵ Bsk I, 153 (219).

⁶ Bsk I, 168 (241).

⁷ DI I, 186.

⁸ Bsk I, 240 (only in B version). Klængur was 47 when he was consecrated in 1152 so he was born ca. 1105 - Bysp I, 113.

Skálholt in 1152.¹ Unlike Björn, but like his predecessors Magnús and Þorlákr at Skálholt, Klængr's family does not seem to have been influential although the ancestry was respectable.² Klængr is listed among the high-born priests of the North in 1143 - when he was probably a cathedral priest at Hólar - and the author of *Hungrvaka* calls him a Northerner (*norðlenskr maðr*).³ His family may well have been from the north but the identification is more probably connected with his long association with the see of Hólar. It was clearly Bishop Björn who brought about Klængr's elevation to the see of Skálholt. The Haukdælir had had their chance but their chieftain and electus Hallr Gizurarson had died in Utrecht before receiving consecration. And, as *Hungrvaka* puts it, when news of his death reached Iceland Hallr's son and successor as chieftain, Gizurr, was abroad and 'it was the selection of everyone who were to decide, under the guidance of Björn bishop of Hólar' that Klængr should be electus.⁴ If the Haukdælir had not had complete control over the selection of Klængr, they did however adapt to this and it may not have been a chance only that when Klængr had been consecrated in 1152 he returned to Iceland in the company of Gizurr Hallsson.⁵ In 1175 when Klængr had become bedridden on a account of old age Gizurr was in Skálholt to greet the incumbent, St Þorlákr.⁶ It is likely that Gizurr was an ever present influence on the see in the intervening years.⁷

While Bishop Björn seems to have had a decisive role in selecting Klængr it is not apparent that Klængr controlled the appointment of Brandr Sæmundarson as electus to the see of Hólar in 1163. Brandr's career up to this time is unknown except that he was a priest and had been present at Bishop Björn's burial which suggests that he had connections with the see before he became bishop.⁸ On his father's side Brandr was of a side-branch of the Oddaverjar and Jón Loftsson accompanied him on his consecration journey to Norway in 1163-64 which suggests their influence on his appointment. Brandr's grandfather, Grímr, was probably the younger son of Loðmundr in Oddi. He married locally it seems as his wife was the sister of Skeggi Brandsson in Skógar (R).

¹ Bsk I, 168, 240-41, Bysp I, 106

² Klængr's ancestry is recorded in *Byskupa ættir* - Bysp I, 10-11. None of the names on his mother's side are identifiable nor on his paternal grandfather's. His paternal grandmother however was the daughter of Arn in Reykjanes (SD) of the Reyknesingar and her mother was a granddaughter of Síðu-Hallr and Einarr *Pveræingr*. Klængr was therefore distantly related to Bishop Björn (third cousin one removed), a first cousin once removed of the chieftain Þorgils Oddason (d. 1150) and Guðmundr Arason was Klængr's second cousin one removed. Through his descent from Síðu-Hallr Klængr was distantly related to almost everyone of consequence in the country. He was for instance fourth cousin of both Jón Loftsson of the Oddaverjar and Gizurr Hallsson of the Haukdælir who were his great friends while he was bishop of Skálholt - Bysp I, 109

³ DI I, 186, Bysp I, 106

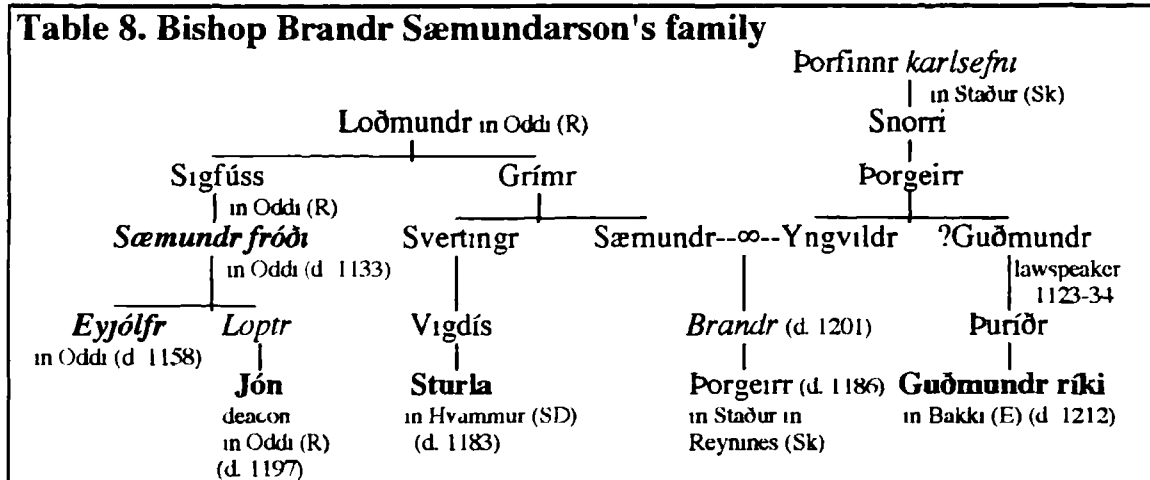
⁴ [Þat var þá allra manna kær sem raða áttu, með forsoþo Bjarnar byskups, at Holum] - Bysp I, 106

⁵ Bysp I, 107

⁶ Bsk I, 99

⁷ Cf. *Sturl.* 73

⁸ Bysp I, 111, Bsk I, 207

Table 8. Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson's family

Both Grímr's sons were however married to women from the north; Svertingr to Þórdís Guðmundardóttir of the Mjóðruvellingar, sister of Þorvaldr *auðgi* (d. 1161) and aunt of Guðmundr *dýri* (d. 1212).¹ Sæmundr - possibly named after his older and more famous cousin in Oddi - was married to Yngvildr Þorgeirsdóttir of the Reynistaðarmenn. Yngvildr may have had a much older brother in Guðmundr Þorgeirsson, lawspeaker 1122-34, who was the father of Þuríðr mother of Guðmundr *dýri* (d. 1212) and Þórðr Þórarinnsson in Laufás (E). Guðmundr may also have been the father of Þorgeirr Guðmundarson who is listed among the high-born priests of 1143.² If these links are correct it seems that Yngvildr was much younger than her brother and she can easily have outlived her nephew the priest. This could explain why Bishop Brandr's son Þorgeirr became householder at Staður in Reynines (Sk), the Reynistaðarmenn's ancestral estate. Yngvildr can have inherited the estate from her brother or nephew; Þorgeirr Brandsson's name suggests close links with his cousin the priest. Bishop Brandr may therefore have been a man of considerable local importance in Skagafjörður with close familial connections with some of the most powerful people in the quarter. If he had inherited Reynistaður it is also likely that he had inherited his family's chieftaincy although it is not known whether the Reynistaðarmenn owned a *godorð*. It is therefore a simplification to view Bishop Brandr only as a protégé of the Oddaverjar; it is probable that like his predecessor he was of a family of ancient but waning importance and was in a position to promote himself. Secondly he had powerful relatives both in the north and the west as well as in Rangárþing who doubtless considered him as their representative. Unlike Klængr and Björn, Bishop Brandr was a family man who not only took an active part in politics but seems to have used his position to further the interests of his family and its influence in Skagafjörður.

St Þorlákr, Klængr's successor at Skálholt, was a very different man from his colleague in Hólar. St Þorlákr was clearly a protégé of the Oddaverjar but he was also

¹ Sturl, 47

² Sturl, 94, DI I 186. Luðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 III, 389-92

the first bishop to have a clear agenda of his own. He is the first bishop on whom we have relatively detailed information and his career prior to his becoming bishop is considered in detail in ch. III 5.4. Like many of his predecessors St Þorlákr was of a poor and insignificant family but respectable ancestry. The family was dissolved when Þorlákr was a child and he accompanied his mother and sister to Oddi. There he was fostered by the priest and chieftain Eyjólfur Sæmundarson (d. 1158) and it appears that his family developed quite close ties with the Oddaverjar; one of his sisters later became a concubine of Jón Loptsson. It must have been the Oddaverjar who paid for St Þorlákr's six year studies in England and France. When he returned it is probable that they were the 'relatives' who wanted him to marry a widow in Háfur (R), a church-farm close to Oddi. Here however St Þorlákr showed that he had an independent turn of mind and refused to get married. Instead of becoming a householder in the Oddaverjar's core-region and starting a family of his own St Þorlákr joined the household of the priest Bjarnhéðinn Sigurðarson in Kirkjubær (VS) (d. 1173). Six years later a wealthy local landowner asked St Þorlákr to head a new house of canons which was to be established at Þykkvibær (VS). Bishop Klængur and the men of the region are cited as the interested parties in the establishment of the house of canons at Þykkvibær¹ and it is difficult to see that the Oddaverjar can have had much to do with it. St Þorlákr became prior in 1168 and abbot a few years later. In the early 1170s Bishop Klængur was becoming increasingly frail and wrote to the archbishop asking for another bishop to be consecrated in his place. The archbishop wrote back and allowed another bishop to be selected and sent to him.² At the Alþing of 1174 three candidates were named; St Þorlákr; Ögmundur Kálfsson abbot, presumably of Flatey (SD) (d. 1188), and Páll Sólvason priest and chieftain in Reykholt (B). Both our sources claim that in the end Bishop Klængur was asked to select one of these three and he chose St Þorlákr.³ It was of course unusual that an outgoing bishop was alive to influence the selection of his successor but even if Klængur was allowed complete freedom in his choice it is likely that he was influenced by the political factions in his diocese. And even if St Þorlákr was appointed on merit only the Oddaverjar clearly interpreted this as a nod in their direction; shortly before Easter 1175 when Bishop Klængur had become too infirm to manage his see St Þorlákr was sent for and on his way from Þykkvibær he was accompanied by Jón Loptsson 'who was then the greatest chieftain in Iceland.'⁴ To greet them in Skálholt was the chieftain Gizurr Hallsson of the Haukdælir, who became resident at Skálholt towards the end of St Þorlákr's episcopacy.⁵ The Oddaverjar could not hope to oust the Haukdælir from Skálholt but they could hope to have more

¹ Bsk I, 96

² Df I, 223

³ Bysp I, 112, Bsk I, 98-99

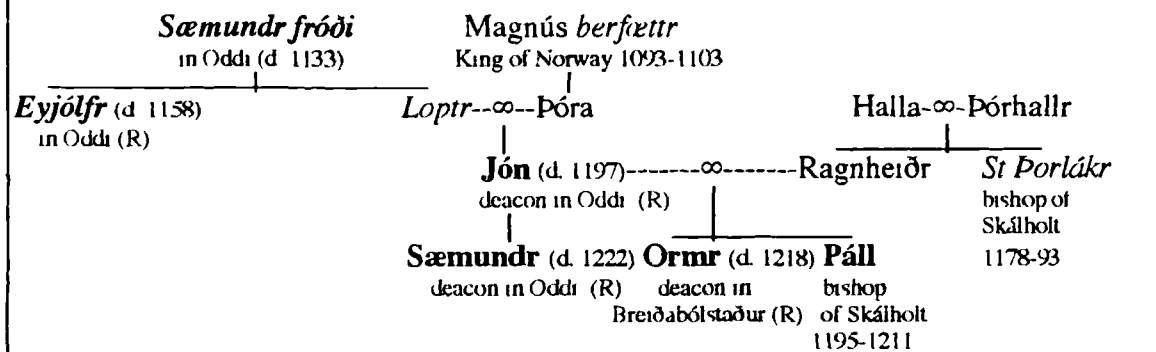
⁴ [er þá var mestr hofðingi á Íslandi] - Bsk I, 99

⁵ Sturl, 172, Bsk I, 128-29, cf Bsk I, 110-13

influence on the affairs of the diocese if it could be made to look as if Gizurr accepted St Þorlákr from Jón Loptsson.

Bishop Klængr died 28 February 1176 but St Þorlákr did not leave for Norway until the summer of 1177 on account of conflict between Norwegians and Icelanders. When he came to Norway it appears that King Magnús and his father Earl Erlingr opposed his consecration and this can only have been because they considered St Þorlákr as a client of the Icelandic chieftains who had been annoying them.¹

Table 9. St Þorlákr's relations with the Oddaverjar



St Þorlákr died in 1193 and on his sickbed had given a ring to his nephew Páll, the illegitimate son of Jón Loptsson and Ragnheiðr Þórhallsdóttir.² This was interpreted, later at least, as a sign of St Þorlákr's will to have Páll succeed him. Páll had studied abroad but was only a deacon and had by the 1190s established himself as a chieftain at Skarð in Land (R). Except for his stint at school in Lincoln there is nothing very religious about Páll Jónsson's early career; he had married young and was like his brothers Sæmundr and Ormr engaged in extending and consolidating their family's grip on Rangárþing. According to *Páls saga's* version of events there were long deliberations at the Alþing of 1194 as to who should succeed St Þorlákr in the see of Skálholt. In the end it was decided, 'mostly on the advice of Hallr Gizurarson' of the Haukdælir, that Bishop Brandr should appoint the electus and he chose Páll Jónsson. Páll refused and the assembly came to a close before the matter was settled. But when everyone had given up asking him he quickly accepted. After these dramatics Páll rode to Skálholt with his father and brothers and took control of the cathedral establishment.³

¹ Bsk I, 100. It is not clear what this dispute was about although it is likely it had something to do with the priest Helgi Skaptason's dispute with Norwegian merchants in 1172 and 1175 - Bsk I 418, 419, IA, 118, 323, 476. This dispute is referred to in Archbishop Eysteinn's first letter to the Icelanders as conflict between the Icelanders and the Norwegian king - DI I, 223.

² Bsk I, 110.

³ [mest at ráði Hallr Gizurarsonar] - Bsk I, 128. It may be that it was Gizurr Hallsson and not his son who gave this advice. Páll Jónsson was not really the type for extreme modesty of this sort, as it seems highly unusual that people should leave the Alþing without resolving an important matter like selecting a bishop. It may be that *Páls saga's* version of events is veiling a more bitter conflict in which the Oddaverjar had their way with some last-minute ploy. The modest candidate is of course a topos in hagiographic literature cf. HMS I, 30, 387, 557. I am indebted to Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir for these references.

Even if St Þorlákr was not the irritating reformer which *Oddaverja þátr* makes him out to have been, a greater contrast to him than Páll Jónsson can hardly be imagined. His appointment no doubt reflects the power of the Oddaverjar in the last days of Jón Loptsson. It appears to have been achieved in peace and co-operation with the Haukdælir who had signalled their lack of preference by allowing Bishop Brandr to decide and by Gizurr Hallsson's continuing presence at Skálholt until his death in 1206.¹ Gizurr and Jón seem to have got along well and it is likely that the appointments of St Þorlákr and Páll Jónsson reflect a deal between them whereby the Oddaverjar selected the man but the Haukdælir were allowed to influence him behind the scenes.

Gizurr Hallsson was again involved in bishop-making in 1201 but this time with negative results for him, and the collective chieftains of Iceland as it turned out. Bishop Brandr of Hólar had died 6 August 1201 and this time the Alþing in the following June could not be waited for. Instead, a meeting was convened at Vellir in Svarfaðardalur (E) on 1 September attended by the abbots of Þingeyrar and Þverá, the chieftains of the north as well as Gizurr Hallsson. Two options were discussed; one was the popular miracle-working priest Guðmundr *góði* Arason and the other Gizurr Hallsson's son, the priest Magnús. Gizurr argued that his son was better connected and had more experience of financial responsibilities. The northern chieftains however insisted that the bishop should be a Northerner and so Guðmundr *góði* was appointed. Guðmundr was himself not present and when he heard he had been appointed he refused and put up an unusually vigorous resistance. Another meeting was convened at Víðimýri (Sk) on 14 October and this time Kolbeinn Tumason managed to persuade Guðmundr. Having achieved his consent, Kolbeinn, and Guðmundr's uncle, the ageing chieftain Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson (d. 1207), immediately rode to Hólar and Kolbeinn assumed control of the cathedral establishment.² It was however to take several more months before final consent was obtained from the powerful chieftains of the south.³

Like many bishops before him Guðmundr *góði* was of insignificant parentage but respectable ancestry. His grandfather was a chieftain in Eyjafjörður but the father was a younger son and Guðmundr was the illegitimate product of Ari's love affair with a married woman. When Ari died adventuring in Norway, Guðmundr's paternal kin nevertheless assumed responsibility for him and it was decided that his uncle, the priest Ingimundr, should take care of him and instruct him for the priesthood. Guðmundr had quite a spectacular career as a priest and miracle worker (discussed in more detail in ch. III 5.4) and his popularity and apparent naiveté seems to have convinced Kolbeinn Tumason that he would be an ideal bishop. Kolbeinn's family, the Ásbirningar,

¹ Bsk I, 128-29

² Sturl, 202-203

³ Sturl, 206-207

controlled most of Skagafjorður by 1200 and it was a natural ambition for Kolbeinn to want to control the see in the same way as the Haukdælir controlled the see of Skálholt. If alliance with the politically waning family of Guðmundr could be made as well, and capital made of elevating an immensely popular figure, so much the better. It proved to be a miscalculation which Kolbeinn paid for with his life at the battle of Víðines in 1208, but the strategy is transparent.

Gizurr Hallsson died in 1206 and his son, the priest Þorvaldr in Hrúni (Á), succeeded him as chieftain of the family. Gizurr's other sons Magnús and Hallr were both priests. Hallr had become lawspeaker in 1203 and was later to become abbot. Magnús was householder at the church-farm Bræðratunga (Á) and seems to have acted as a sort of second chieftain to his older brother. In 1211 Bishop Páll died and had earlier summoned Þorvaldr and Magnús to his bedside and told them how to arrange all things as he wished.¹ The Haukdælir's authority over the bishopric seems still to have been acknowledged and it seems once again to have been their prerogative to select an *electus*. Now they chose a nephew, one Teitr Bersason, son of Gizurr's illegitimate daughter Halldóra and the priest Bersi Halldórsson (d. 1204). This Bersi was probably of the Mýramenn in Borg (B) and seems to have given up his chieftaincy and patrimony to Bersi Vermundarson in Borg. Very little else is known about Teitr; he was selected in 1212, left for Norway with Þorvaldr Gizurarson a year later and died abroad in 1214.² Magnús had moved to Skálholt in 1213, probably as soon as Teitr and Þorvaldr left for Norway, and taken over control of the see. When news of Teitr's death had arrived in Iceland Magnús was selected in 1215 and consecrated in 1216.³

In 1237 both bishops, Guðmundr *góði* and Magnús, died. Both had had stormy episcopacies and were old and frail and arrangements had been made to appoint their successors even before they died. In 1235 Magnús Guðmundarson (d. 1240) had been selected as the next bishop of Skálholt and it was probably in the same year that the men of the north selected the priest Kygri-Björn Hjaltason (d. 1238)⁴ They sailed together to Norway in 1236 and the archbishop rejected them both. Kygri-Björn was a career-priest and scholar of some distinction (see ch. III 5.5 1) who had been attached to the household of Sighvatr Sturluson in Eyjafjorður and had led the clerical opposition to Bishop Guðmundr. A 14th century source implies that Kygri-Björn was rejected on grounds of illegitimacy.⁵ This may well be right, although it is equally likely that the archbishop did not find him acceptable because he was a puppet of the Ásbirningar and Sturlungar and would allow them to continue to control the see of Hólar.

¹ [ok skipaði hann þá til allra hluta fyrir þeim eptir sinum vilja] - Bsk I, 144

² IA, 124, 183, 325, Sturl, 193, 227, 230

³ IA, 23, 63, 124, 184, 325, Sturl, 255

⁴ IA, 65, Sturl, 382

⁵ Bsk II, 186

Kygn-Björn may have been an ambiguous choice but he was at least an eminent cleric, although his loyalties may have been open to questioning. The choice of Magnús Guðmundarson as electus to the bishopric of Skálholt on the other hand must indicate that the chieftains of the south were running out of ideas and loyal clerics. Magnús was a chieftain-priest - one of the last of his kind - son of Guðmundr *gríss* Ámundason (d. 1210), chieftain in Þingvellir (Á). Magnús was a grandson of Jón Loptsson and therefore closely related to the Oddaverjar and a brother-in-law of both Þorvaldr Gizurarson of the Haukdælir (d. 1235) and Jón Sigmundarson of the Svínfellingar (d. 1212). Magnús had been in the alliance of chieftains who assembled an army and marched on Hólar in 1209 to teach Bishop Guðmundr his place, and in 1216 and 1217 he had struggled with Snorri Sturluson for supremacy over Kjalarnes.¹ Apart from this, and being listed among other noteworthies in two charters and a donation to the house of canons in Viðey (K),² Magnús does not figure in accounts; however these scraps strongly suggest that he was in every way a respectable chieftain who was being overshadowed by his more powerful neighbours in Árnesþing and Borgarfjörður. Magnús is unlikely to have been illegitimate and was not married as far as can be seen; it is therefore difficult to see any reason for the archbishop to reject him other than that he was a chieftain.³

The archbishop used the opportunity, after having rejected these not over-cautiously appointed bishops-elect, to consecrate Norwegians without consulting the Icelanders. Henceforth the selection of bishops in Iceland was in the hands of the archbishop and the chapter in Niðarós, an arrangement which was to have swift and weighty consequences for the development of the Icelandic church.

The sources usually talk of election (*kjör*; *kosning*) of the bishops before they were sent for consecration but whether the selection process had anything to do with the requirements of canon law, and whether distinction was made between *electio* and *postulatio*, cannot be said with any degree of certainty.⁴ It is possible that in the 12th century there was in place a procedure of elimination, whereby the men of each of the three quarters which made up the diocese of Skálholt proposed a candidate. This would appear from *Þorláks saga's* information that in 1174 the choice boiled down to Abbot Þorlákr (Eastern quarter), the priest Páll Sölvason (Southern quarter) and Abbot Ögmundur (Western quarter).⁵ The author of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* seems to be referring to an arrangement of this kind when he says of Guðmundr Brandsson from

¹ Sturl, 220, 252, 253-54

² DI I, 395, 496, 507

³ Cf. Magnús Már Lárusson 1958b 200

⁴ Cf. Magnús Már Lárusson 1967c 53, Gallén 1956f 612-15. For a thoroughgoing treatment of episcopal selection in Norway see Joys 1948

⁵ Bsk I, 98

Hjarðarholt (SD) that he was 'most often named, other than Klængur, when there were to be episcopal elections in the Western quarter' in 1151.¹

What we can say is that in the second half of the 12th century some kind of public deliberations took place and that the reigning bishop always seems to have had the last word. Whether his word was decisive or whether it was just the formal confirmation of an already achieved consensus cannot be discerned; it probably varied. When Guðmundr *góði* had been appointed by the Northerners in 1202, he wrote to Bishop Páll asking him to support or reject. Páll wrote to Sæmundr, his brother and chieftain of his family, and asked him what to do. Sæmundr replied:

You know brother that Guðmundr electus has not been a great friend in our dispute with Sigurðr [Ormsson]. But he is greatly acclaimed by men and it is likely that he has been elected because it is God's will. I have heard that he is suitable for many reasons, on account of his benevolence and virtue and asceticism which is most important. But if there is more to it, then [by rejecting him] you lift the responsibility for their choice off the backs of the Northerners. But it is my counsel that you give him your vote rather than reject him because it is uncertain who is more likely to please God than this one and it is best to bet on the favourite. It is uncertain that anyone can be found who is above criticism. The Northerners acted on their own in their election so let them take the responsibility for the consequences.²

Páll then summoned Sigurðr Ormsson and the Haukdælir brothers and announced that he had been asked to decide and that he had decided to support Guðmundr. The chieftains seem to have indicated their assent and from this point the coast was clear for Guðmundr to become bishop.

Sæmundr indicates that he thought it was irregular that the Northerners had made up their minds unilaterally although he also makes it clear that he thought it was their problem to decide on their bishop. It is unlikely that Sæmundr was more than a child when the previous bishop of Hólar had been selected in 1163 so his opinion may just as well have been based on his sense of political propriety as any knowledge of earlier practice. Sæmundr clearly had his reservations about Guðmundr *góði* but it is also apparent that he prized consensus more highly than fighting for optimal results for himself. The Oddaverjar were not, any more than the Haukdælir, in a position to force their choice upon the Northerners once these had united and Sæmundr apparently saw no political mileage in making a dispute of the issue.

¹ [] mest hafður í orðstefi þá er um biskupa skyldu kosningar vera í Vestfirðinga ljórdungi, annar maður en Klængur] - Sturl, 32

² I am grateful to Peter Foxe for help on this translation. [Veistu bróðir að Guðmundur biskupselni hefur ekki mikill vin vengi í malum vorum Sigurðar. En þó er hann mjög leyfður af monnum og líklegt að þú muni kosningur undir hann fallinn að það mun guðs vilji vera. Spyr eg að hann mun fyrir mart vel til fallinn, bæði gæsku sinnar og síðvendi og hreinlitis er mestu varðar. En ef nokkvað er annað í þá takið þér vanda af Norðlendingum að þeir abyrgist sjallir kjör sitt. En það er mitt ráð, kjós hann heldur til en frá því að eigi er vist hver líklegri er til að guði líki en sja og er vænu best að hætta. Orðið að sa finnist að ekki megi að finna. Einhliur gerðust Norðlendingar að um kjör sitt. Beri þeir nú abyrgð fyrir hve verður] - Sturl, 206

Whether they did it at the *Alþing* or not it seems that apart from St Jón all the bishops of Hólar were selected by the Northerners; Bishops Ketill, Björn and Brandr were all of northern chieftain families although Brandr's paternal family came from the south. It seems therefore always to have been *de facto* the decision of the northern chieftains to choose their bishop, although they may have showed greater deference to their southern counterparts, and the bishop of Skálholt, in allowing them to take part in the decision-making process.

As to the bishops of Skálholt it is likely that the appointments of Ísleifr, Gizurr and Þorlákr were entirely in the hands of the Haukdælir. It is possible that the appointment of Magnús Einarsson represents an attempt by other families, the Reykhyllingar and Síðumenn, to gain influence over the see but there are no indications that this was in conflict with the interests of the Haukdælir. It is likely however that as the 12th century wore on the Haukdælir had to allow other families greater access to the bishops and the see; if this was a problem they seem to have solved it by making an alliance with the Oddaverjar. If Bishop Klængr was not the Haukdælir's preferred option they seem to have adapted to this and found that it was possible and in many ways advantageous to have someone else as bishop while retaining virtual control over the see by simply being always present. This may not have worked entirely satisfactorily in Bishop Klængr's episcopacy; towards the end of his life the see was in serious financial trouble and both *Hungrvaka* and *Þorláks saga* claim that in the autumn of 1174 no offerings reached the see,¹ which suggests that they were being withheld. Klængr had been extravagant in his spending of the see's revenues² and it may be that the Haukdælir had not been able to control him, because as soon as he became infirm they intervened and froze all assets, in order to curb his spending. St Þorlákr seems to have owed his elevation in part to having a reputation as a prudent manager, but it is primarily a sign of an alliance between the Haukdælir and the Oddaverjar. These neighbouring families had come to dominate the southern flatlands by the second half of the 12th century and it is possible that the more powerful Haukdælir had supported the Oddaverjar against their rivals in Rangárþing. Together they made up a formidable alliance which will have been near impossible to challenge. The Haukdælir thus retained their influence over the see but allowed the Oddaverjar to select the bishops. The political clout of the Oddaverjar diminished after Jón Loftsson's death in 1197 and this is reflected in the appointments of the Haukdælir Teitr Bersason and Magnús Gizurarson after Bishop Páll's death in 1211. There are however no indications that they were selected in the face of opposition from the Oddaverjar and it is in fact unlikely that by this date the Haukdælir could have appointed anyone without the Oddaverjar's help. The increasing competition and rise of other families to national

¹ Bysp 1, 113, Bsk I, 99

² Bysp 1 107-108, 109-10

importance is reflected in the selection in 1235 of Magnús Guðmundarson, a prestigious if peripheral chieftain, a perfect compromise between the Haukdælir and the Sturlungar.

There are interesting differences in the types of bishops selected for the two dioceses; all the northern bishops down to Guðmundr *góði* were of chieftainly rank, if they were not chieftains themselves, and only Bishop Björn was not a family man. This contrasts with the four bishops of Skálholt in the period 1122 to 1195 who were all - with the possible exception of Bishop Magnús - of insignificant parentage and did not have wives or legitimate children. Around 1200 this pattern was reversed; an ascetic was appointed to the see of Hólar in 1202 while chieftains with their own families ruled in Skálholt between 1195 and 1237.

It was argued at the beginning of this chapter that by the time of Bishop Gizurr the chieftains of the south no longer saw it as advantageous to be bishops themselves and preferred to have as bishops controllable protégés. This naturally implies that the Haukdælir had complete control over the see of Skálholt and were even able to retain this control when outsiders became bishops. In the last quarter of the 12th century the Haukdælir had to acknowledge the influence of the Oddaverjar but they continued to hold all the reins by allying with their neighbours rather than competing with them, an arrangement no doubt advantageous to the rising Oddaverjar.

In the north on the other hand the fact that different chieftain-families had representatives at Hólar suggests that there was in Skagafjörður no single family with absolute control over the region such as the Haukdælir had in Árnesþing. The bishops of the north seem to have been selected because they were the best candidates from families who were influential but unlikely to use their control of the bishopric to menace others. Ketill Þorsteinsson was clearly a chieftain, and possibly his son too, although their branch of the Mjóðruvellingar did not reassert itself. Bishop Björn seems to have been the last of a family of waning power centred on the important estate Þverá (E); if Bishop Brandr was not a chieftain when he became bishop, he certainly seems to have done everything in his power to consolidate the position of his family, the Reynistaðarmenn. It was through no fault of his that the Reynistaðarmenn had become overshadowed by the Ásbirningar by 1200. It is traditionally accepted that the Ásbirningar reigned supreme in Skagafjörður for much of the 12th century¹ but while it is likely that they were among the most influential families in the region there is little reason to assign pre-eminence to them until the close of the 12th century. Kolbeinn Tumason may have pretended that he had no preference² but it is clear that the selection of Guðmundr *góði* reflects Kolbeinn's absolute control over Skagafjörður and

¹ Jon Jóhannesson 1956: 279, Gunnar Karlsson 1975: 34, Jon Viðar Sigurðsson 1989: 51, 60-61

² Sturl, 202

prominence in the northern quarter.¹ Kolbeinn clearly thought that he would be able to have full control of the bishopric and the ascetic Guðmundr would be content to leave all worldly matters to him.

Kolbeinn's miscalculation on this score reflects a growing awareness among at least aristocratic clerics that the clergy had an identity and agenda of their own (see ch. III 5 5); it may be that the opposite development in the diocese of Skálholt where chieftains occupied the see from 1195 reflects the southern chieftains' caution in this matter. The answer depends on the relevance we attach to the reforms of St Þorlákr and the problems they caused for the chieftains.

The reason why men like Páll Jónsson and Magnús Gizurarson became bishops may however be less conspiratorial. Although both were chieftains neither was the leader of his family. Both were younger sons - and Páll was illegitimate - who could not expect to supplant their brothers or promote their own sons as leaders of their families. It may therefore simply be a coincidence that men of this sort needed respectable posts in 1194 and 1215. Another possible factor is that the sees had been accumulating wealth throughout the 12th century and it may be that by the close of that century the see of Skálholt had become so rich and controlled so much land that the chieftains of the southern flatlands did not care to take any chances with the management and therefore took it into their own hands. That this was a major concern is reflected in *Hungrvaka*, which stresses the importance of prudent management of episcopal finances, and in the chieftains' persecution of Bishop Guðmundr on account of his liberal attitude to money.

III 4.2. *Bishops as chieftains*

For the early bishops of Skálholt down to the episcopacy of Klængr (1152-76) *Hungrvaka* is virtually our only source. In the context of the bishops' political power this source therefore requires special consideration. We have already seen how the author of *Hungrvaka* depicted Bishop Gizurr as the perfect bishop (ch. III 1). Bishop Þorlákr Rúnólfsson (1118-33) cuts a very different figure. According to the annals, his episcopate saw a series of conflicts. This is reflected in *Hungrvaka*, where it says that

Many chieftains were difficult to Bishop Þorlákr because of their disobedience, but some because of their unrighteousness and lawbreaking, but he managed everything as well as possible²

¹ Sturl, 195

² [Margir hofðingjar váru Þorláki byskupi óhægrir fyrir sakir sinnar óhlýðni, en sumir í óráðvendni ok lagabrotum, en hann hafði allt í höndum sem best váru efnir á.] - Bysp I, 98

This is hardly flattering, and the author of *Hungrvaka* concentrates on other aspects of Þorlákr's episcopate, his teaching and financial prudence, the writing of the Christian law section which he instigated with Bishop Ketill of Hólar, but mainly his devoutness and humility, giving the image that Þorlákr was not a very forceful personality¹ It is interesting that *Hungrvaka's* description of Bishop Þorlákr in many ways resembles Gunnlaugr's description of St Jón, i.e. they were both models of spiritual virtue rather than statesmen. The difference is that this was Gunnlaugr's ideal while the author of *Hungrvaka* is respectful but reserves his admiration for a very different kind of bishop.

Bishop Magnús Einarsson (1134-48) was a much more imposing character according to the author of *Hungrvaka*. He distinguished himself in conciliation even before he became bishop; he '... always reconciled all men where he was present at [court] cases, and withheld neither his words nor his wealth.' After being consecrated in Denmark he was just off the ship when he made a dramatic entry at the Alþing where the court was in session and there was a disagreement concerning some case or other. Then a man came to the court and said that Bishop Magnus was riding to the assembly. But the men were so glad to hear this news that they all went home [i.e. to their booths] promptly. The reader is left to assume that Magnús's presence was in itself enough for peace to be made, disputes simply evaporated wherever he went. This is emphasised even more strongly:

It was soon apparent what an excellent man he was in his magnanimity and [good] management of his own and others' matters, in that he never spared wealth while he was bishop to reconcile those who had earlier been at odds, and gave all the time of his own [wealth] to make up the difference when terms could not be agreed on, and therefore no conflicts occurred between men while Magnus was bishop²

It is significant that the other aspect of Magnús's episcopate which the author of *Hungrvaka* emphasises is his attention to the financial health of the see and the grandeur of the cathedral. Among the assets Magnús secured for the see were Vestmannaeyjar, which, if not already by this time, were later one of Iceland's most important fishing stations. We are told that Magnús intended to found a monastery there but did not live to realise this intention.³

Here we have what was to the author of *Hungrvaka* probably the ideal bishop. Bishop Magnús was not only committed to peace, he also had the means to make it. He

¹ Bysp 1, 93-98

² | var avallt alla menn sættandi hvar sem hann var við mal manna staddr, ok sparði þess ekki, hvárki orð sín ne auðæfi " [99] - " þá er menn váru at dómnum ok urðu eigi ásáttir um eitthvert mal. En þá kom maðr at dómnum ok sagði at Magnus byskup ríði a þingit. En menn urðu sva segnir þeim sögu, at þegar gengu allir menn heim " [100] - "Þa reyndisk ok bratt hværr agæusmaðr hann var i sinu stórlýndi ok forsja bæði fyrir sína hönd ok annarra, at því at hann sparði aldri tjárlutu til meðan hann var byskup, at sætta þá sem aðr váru sundrþykkir, ok lagði þat jafnan at sínu til er þeira var í milli, ok urðu at því yngvar deildir með mönnum meðan Magnus var byskup | [101] - Bysp 1, 99-101

³ Bysp 1 101-102

sought to strengthen the see's financial position and enhance its prestige, in order that the church's power to make and maintain the peace would be secured for coming generations. That this is what Bishop Magnús did, is of course only the author's interpretation, which we have no means of verifying. What is significant is that this is a role the author of *Hungrvaka* was keen to see the church have. We cannot know how consciously or clearly the author of *Hungrvaka* and his contemporaries were thinking about this. For instance, there is no way of showing that the author of *Hungrvaka* wanted the church to grow in power at the expense of the secular chieftains, he probably would not even have liked the idea. Although it may seem contradiction to us, the author of *Hungrvaka* wanted at the same time to preserve whatever it was he perceived as the existing order and to increase the power and prestige of the church. To him that probably meant the strengthening of the existing order and not any call for supremacy by the church.

Klængr Þorsteinsson (1152-76) is the last bishop treated in *Hungrvaka* and the description of his episcopate is clearly affected by its being much closer in time to the author. The description of Klængr's political involvement is much more realistic than those of his predecessors:

Bishop Klængr was such a great advocate when he was asked for help, that he was a great chieftain both because of wisdom and rhetoric, he also had considerable knowledge of the laws of the country. Because of that, those chieftains who had the support of the bishop [always] won their cases. And there was not an arbitration on major issues for which Bishop Klængr was not selected.¹

The author goes on to say that his most trusted friends were the chieftains Jón Loptsson and Gizurr Hallsson, who were probably the two most powerful chieftains in Iceland in the latter half of the 12th century. Here we have a very different type of conciliation. Bishop Klængr took sides. He used his skill and position to support some chieftains against others and we are not told what his motives were. We are not even told how Klængr's involvement affected the peace and we can only guess if the author of *Hungrvaka* saw this as conciliation at all or only as a different type of conciliation from that of Bishops Gizurr and Magnús. The latter seems more likely though. The author is all admiration for Klængr's involvement in political conflict and this is the way he would have realistically wanted the bishops of his own day to behave. When it comes to the gritty details of everyday politics conciliation ceases to be a simple issue.

Hungrvaka's descriptions of conciliation under the bishops up to Klængr, are probably based on little more than the author's vague perceptions of the extent of unrest

¹ [Klængr byskup var svá mikill málalygismaðr, ef hann var atsóttur til aðjá, at hann var bæði hofðingr mikill sakir vızku ok málsnıllðar, honum varu ok landslögın í kunnara lagi. Af því hofðu þeir hofðingjar allan hlut mála er byskup var í fylgi með. Var ok engı sú gørð um stormal at eigi væri Klængr byskup til hvęrrar tekinn.] - Bysp I, 109

in each period. Knowing that there was considerable unrest during Bishop Þorlákr's episcopate - many conflicts are recorded in the annals¹ - he attributed to him modest success in peacekeeping. Knowing of little unrest during Bishop Magnús's episcopate - there is rather less sign of unrest in the annals² - the author interpreted that as the bishop's doing. With Bishops Klængr in Skálholt and Brandr Sæmundarson in Hólar (1163-1201), we begin to have other sources which give a more balanced picture of the bishops' involvement in politics.

In 1160 the friends of Sturla Þórðarson in Hvammur and Einarr Þorgilsson in Staðarhóll decided to try and put a stop to their conflict, which was getting increasingly vicious. They asked Bishop Klængr to arbitrate and in the end both Sturla and Einarr agreed to this. Sturla did however make the condition that Klængr swear a *fimmtardómseiðr*, the strongest form of oath,³ that his verdict was fair. After Klængr had given his verdict whereby Sturla only got a little more than Einarr and had sworn his oath Sturla remarked: 'I respect the bishop's oath like Easter mass and it is an honour for us. But most will call the payments small and the settlement unprofitable.'⁴

It may be that Klængr was asked to arbitrate because his being bishop was meant to guarantee his impartiality but it is clear that Sturla did not have much faith in this. He was no doubt justified in this; Klængr and Einarr were second cousins and Klængr may have had his affair with Einarr's sister by this time.⁵ Ten years later Sturla and Einarr were still at loggerheads and this time the chieftains of the country split into two camps; the one supporting Einarr led by Bishop Klængr and the other supporting Sturla led by Bishop Brandr. Here blood-relations seem to have decided alliance. Klængr and Einarr were second cousins and Sturla was the first cousin once removed of Bishop Brandr. This time all mediation failed and each prosecuted and convicted the other at the Alþing. Before the Alþing was adjourned it was however agreed that it was too dangerous to let matters stand thus and a settlement was reached whereby Bishop Klængr and Sturla's father-in-law Þoðvarr Þórðarson in Garðar (B) were to arbitrate. True to form Sturla was unhappy about their verdict and the conflict continued unabated.⁶

¹ Conflicts of varying degrees are mentioned in 1118, 1120, 1123, 1124, 1125, 1127, 1128 and 1129 - That is in 8 years of Þorlákr's 15 year episcopate. Based on *Annales regni*, IA, 112-13

² Killings and one robbery are mentioned in 1136, 1138, 1140, 1143 and 1146 - That is in 5 years of Magnús's 14 year episcopate. Based on *Annales regni*, IA, 113-14

³ Grg III, s v eiðr

⁴ [Svo virði eg eið biskups sem þakamessu en sómi er oss það. En flestur munu kalla góldin ei mikil og gerðir eigi fésamur] - Sturl, 63

⁵ Two years earlier Klængr had supervised an ordeal where the chieftain Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson cleared himself of being the father of Yngvildr Þorgilsdóttir's child. Einarr, Yngvildr's brother, had brought the accusation and Klængr made him pay a compensation - Sturl, 60-61. It is tempting to assume that Klængr and Yngvildr met on this occasion and that thenceforth Klængr supported Einarr, possibly in return for Einarr not making an issue of the bishop's affair.

⁶ Sturl, 73-74

This is all we know of Bishop Klœngr's involvement in secular politics and although this is not much to build on it seems that the role Klœngr was playing out was identical to the one we find extremely powerful chieftains like Jón Loptsson in. Their role was defined by their exalted position; by being too powerful to be interested in gaining anything but prestige from other people's conflicts. It was clearly not unbecoming for the bishops to take sides according to their familial relations but they were probably expected to advocate peaceful settlement and an end to conflicts within their party. In this they were no different from chieftains who had absolute control of their areas and did not need to pick quarrels with their neighbours in order to retain the support and respect of their own *þingmenn*.

The basis of the bishops' power was of course in reality different from that of the chieftains but it was natural for them to assume as their role-model the ideal chieftain. This idea of the bishop as the ideal chieftain is particularly transparent in *Hungrvaka* and *Páls saga* but we can also see it at work in the career of Bishop Brandr of Hólar who is the only 12th century bishop for whose involvement in politics we have relatively detailed descriptions.

After Bishop Brandr had aided Sturla in 1170 we hear nothing of his involvement in politics until 1180 when Sturla had finally got Einarr out of the way and had begun to encroach on chieftains in other regions. This time his adversary was the priest Páll Sǫlvason in Reykholt (B) whose wife was the sister of Bishop Brandr's wife. Páll's daughter was married to the northern chieftain Guðmundr *dýri* and Guðmundr and Brandr brought a large force to Páll's aid in the early spring of 1180.¹ There was however no fighting and the dispute remained unsolved for another year. At the Alþing of 1181 Sturla learned that Bishop Brandr had appealed to Jón Loptsson to support Páll with all his might. On hearing this Sturla gave in and publicly announced that he would reconcile himself to Jón's arbitration.²

In 1183 a conflict erupted in Húnaþing among the Húnrøðlingar. The issues and personalities are obscure but Bishop Brandr and his son Þorgeirr came down heavily on the side of Þórðr Ívarsson in Þorkelshvoll (H) and brought a force to his aid in the summer of 1184 after he had successfully prosecuted his adversary Jón Húnrøðarson. The intimidation was successful and the issue was submitted to Bishop Brandr's arbitration.³ Brandr's son Þorgeirr had been married in 1179 to a daughter of the chieftain Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson and was a householder at Staður in Reynines (Sk).⁴ He seems to have been establishing himself as a chieftain in Skagafjorður but he died in 1186.⁵

¹ Sturl, 93

² Sturl, 98

³ Sturl, 116

⁴ Sturl, 109, 116-17

⁵ Sturl, 118

In 1187 trouble arose in Fljót (Sk); a group of thugs pillaged in the area and were sheltered by the householder Björn Gestsson in Sandur in Ólafsfjorður (E). The chieftain of Fljót, the priest Jón Ketilsson (d. 1192), had an estate at Holt in Fljót but lived at Hólar. Two householders from Fljót sought him out there and asked him to help them out. Jón turned to Brandr for advice and the bishop told him that it was advisable to rid the countryside of sinister characters like Björn. Jón and his followers then went to Ólafsfjorður and killed Björn, incurring the wrath of his chieftain Qnundr Porkelsson as a result. A revenge killing ensued and Jón quickly found that he was no match for Qnundr. Again he sought the advice of Bishop Brandr who told him to seek the help of the chieftain Guðmundr dýri. Guðmundr however refused to help Jón and faced with a complete loss of honour he gave his *godorð* to Guðmundr.¹ It is impossible to know whether Brandr had foreseen this outcome but considering his vested interests in the region and that Guðmundr dýri was Bishop Brandr's first cousin once removed it is likely that his involvement was coloured more by his own political interests rather than any ecclesiastical agenda.

In 1191 one Sumarliði, a major householder at the church-farm Tjorn in Svarfaðardalur (E), was killed by his neighbour's son. The killer got away and one of the men who aided him was the subdeacon Snorri Grímsson from Hof in Hofðastrond (Sk) (d. 1208). Snorri's father, Grímr Snorrason (d. 1196), seems to have been a minor chieftain and they had asked Sumarliði for his sister's hand in marriage for Snorri. He had rejected their offer and Snorri seems to have been offended by this. Sumarliði was a *þingmaðr* and relative of Guðmundr dýri and he prosecuted Snorri for conspiracy to kill and aiding and abetting. According to *Guðmundar saga dýra* Snorri paid a heavy fine and was outlawed from Skagafjorður and went to Oddi.² This may have been a settlement because *Prestsaga Guðmundar Arasonar* claims that Bishop Brandr supported the prosecution of Snorri and had intended to make a panel declare that Snorri was guilty of conspiracy to kill and of aiding and abetting, but Guðmundr Arason and other supporters of Snorri persuaded Bishop Þorlákr to have a panel declare Snorri's innocence.³ Guðmundr góði was Snorri's first cousin and had been a district priest at his father's household at Hof in 1185-87. Snorri and Bishop Brandr may have been third cousins but Brandr seems to have once again chosen to support Guðmundr dýri. St Þorlákr's involvement in this affair is interesting; it is the only known instance where he influenced court proceedings but our sources are unfortunately not clear enough for us to appreciate what his motives were.

In 1197 when Guðmundr dýri had burned Qnundr Porkelsson in his farmstead both bishops joined Jón Loptsson in seeking a settlement and in the end it was agreed

¹ Sturl, 129-30

² Sturl, 135-37

³ Sturl, 172

that Jón was to arbitrate.¹ The following year when the truce had broken down and Guðmundr *dýri* and his adversaries led by Þorgrímr *alíkarl* were poised to fight in Svarfaðardalur (E), Brandr came there and urged them to break up their garrisons. He even persuaded Þorgrímr to leave the region altogether and violent conflict was thus avoided for the time being.² While this looks like a peacemaking mission it was hardly a coincidence that it was Guðmundr *dýri*'s enemy who had to give ground.

Shortly after 1190 Bishop Brandr had taken control of the church-farm Vellir in Svarfaðardalur (E). The owner had died and in the bishop's opinion his sons were not capable to take over. By the year 1200 the heirs thought they were old enough and asked the caretaker, whom Brandr had appointed, to give up the *staðr*. He refused and skirmishes ensued until the heirs enlisted the help of the chieftain Ögmundur *sneis*. Under his command they occupied the farmstead and prepared for battle by fortifying the church-yard. Bishop Brandr on the other side was not prepared to give up this important church-farm and assembled a force from as far afield as Húnaþing. This force marched on Vellir under the command of Brandr's grandson Kolbeinn Arnórsson and one Hafr Brandsson who may have been the bishop's son. It did not come to any fighting however and in the end Brandr's army retreated and Guðmundr *dýri* intervened, removing the heirs from Vellir. He then made a deal with Brandr whereby a new caretaker was appointed and the heirs were promised control of Vellir after that man's death.³

In this case Brandr clearly had the law of the church behind him, the *staðr* at Vellir was church property and should properly have been under the bishop's control. His methods were however those of any well connected chieftain; enlisting the help of friends and relatives to mount expeditions and ensuring success by intimidation and even force if needed. This kind of episcopal authority depended on the bishop being a part of the secular power structure, maintaining strong ties with a power base built on familial relations. Brandr's family may have owned a *goðorð* - it is likely to have been among those which Brandr's great-grandson Brandr Kolbeinsson owned⁴ - and it possessed one of the largest estates in the country at Staður in Reynines. It was as a major chieftain in Skagafjörður that Brandr became bishop and it was his strong local power base which made him an effective bishop. To what extent he was effective as a bishop is a difficult question; the visible consequences of his policies are mainly the dramatic rise of Guðmundr *dýri* as the dominant chieftain in Eyjafjörður and it may be that he delayed the rise of Kolbeinn Tumason as the dominant chieftain in Skagafjörður until after 1200. We lack the source material to evaluate Brandr's influence on the

¹ Sturl, 154

² Sturl, 161

³ Sturl, 173-75

⁴ Sturl 531

development of the church but as his forceful stance in the matter of the control of Vellir suggests he promoted its rights vigorously if not in an entirely orthodox manner. It says a lot about this period, and the church's influence, that where St Þorlákr failed with weapons such as excommunication Bishop Brandr succeeded with old style chieftain-tactics.

Bishop Brandr was no doubt the last of his kind. While Bishops Páll and Magnús of Skálholt were both chieftains they were probably better acquainted with ideas on the different stature and behaviour required of church dignitaries. Bishop Páll had not been averse to using his status as bishop to take an almost sinister part in his brother's humiliation of Sígurðr Ormsson chieftain of the Svínfellingar in 1200,¹ but after Guðmundr *góði* became bishop of Hólar in 1203 and started to insist on every possible kind of liberty for the church it was no longer possible to be seen to side openly with the secular powers. *Páls saga's* irritation on this score is the best evidence we have regarding the effect Guðmundr's ideas had on the *ancien régime* in the Icelandic church. Although Bishop Guðmundr represents a watershed in the development of the church in Iceland, change had long been in the air; it is to the matter of reform of the church we now turn.

III 4.3 *Reform and reaction*

In 1153 a new archdiocese was created for Norway and the colonies in the Atlantic with a metropolitan in Niðarós. In the following decades the Norwegian church embarked upon a serious programme of reform, gaining a number of privileges from King Magnús Erlingsson (1164-84) but running into serious confrontation with King Sverrir (1185-1202).² There is no sign of any of these currents reaching Iceland until the 1170s. Bishop Brandr was the first Icelandic bishop to be consecrated in Niðarós, in 1163, but there are no indications that the great reformer Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson (1161-88) used the opportunity to influence the new bishop of Hólar. It was not until Bishop Klængr had become burdened by old age in the early 1170s that the Archbishop of Niðarós began to make his authority felt in Iceland. In response to Klængr's plea to be relieved of his duties Archbishop Eysteinn wrote a letter to the bishops of Iceland, all other dignitaries and the whole people, most likely in 1173. He started by reminding the Icelanders of his authority - an indication that this was indeed the first time he had written to Iceland - and then went on to denounce those who killed

¹ Sturl, 189-90.

² Bagge 1981, 1989a, Björkvik 1970a, Bugge 1916b, Bull 1915, Gunnes 1970a, 1970b, 1971, 1974a, Helle 1964: 27-32, 1988, Holmsen 1965, Holtzmann 1938, Johnsen 1945a, 1951a, 1951b, 1967, Joys 1948: 136-89, Kolsrud 1937-40, 1940-43, 1958: 186-202, Skanland 1969

or maimed clerics and those who led promiscuous lives. He ostracised clerics who had killed and forbade all clerics to involve themselves in litigation except on behalf of destitute relatives.¹ Promiscuity and the privileges of clerical status (*privilegium canonis*) as well as ecclesiastical jurisdiction over clerics (*privilegium fori*) were the issues the church was to fight in the following decades.²

There is no doubt that St Þorlákr (1178-93) was the first Icelandic bishop to advocate the reform policies of the Norwegian Archbishops. The question is which policies he emphasised. As we have already discussed (ch. III 3.4) far too great weight has been attached to his claims to church property. While there can be no doubt that he did call for a recognition of the church's authority over ecclesiastical property by church owners, this was a much less dramatic affair than the author of *Oddaverja þáttur* liked to imagine and in no way as significant as St Þorlákr's main interests.

The A version of *Þorláks saga helga* is far from specific in its account of St Þorlákr's reforms. It speaks in general terms of the saint's efforts to keep his flock on the straight and narrow path; people's disobedience and his discipline.³ In similarly general terms it mentions his guidance to the clergy and how he favoured clerics who 'lived virtuously and preserved their holy orders as appropriate' and 'those who were less virtuous and preserved their holy orders carelessly he gently admonished to do better and change their ways.'⁴ The only issues the saga identifies as special interests of St Þorlákr are marriage and adultery. He

put great emphasis on holding those together who were joined in holy matrimony, and punished those severely who fell short with fines and penances⁵

and

broke up all those unions in his days which he knew to be illegally joined, whether greater or lesser men were involved⁶

And on St Þorlákr's tactics we are informed that

he was not entirely of one mind with some men and chieftains because he only sanctioned that which was proper in their actions. It was in his opinion a greater lapse of holy Christianity if noble men got away with grave things. He saw no reason to think that those who already had

¹ The letter survives only in a 15th century Icelandic translation - DI I, 221-23

² Jón Johannesson 1956 220-24, Guðrun Ása Grímsdóttir 1982, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1982b

³ Bsk I, 105-107

⁴ [síðlátliga lifðu ok sínar vígslur varðveittu nokkuð eptir ákveðnu er miðr gættu síðlættis, ok sínar vígslur varðveittu óvarligrar, minnu hann á með blíðligum boðorðum betr at gera, ok snúa sínu ráði áleiðis] - Bsk I, 102

⁵ [. lagði a þat mikla stund at halda þeim monnum saman, er teingdir voru helgum hjúskap, en lagði þeim monnum þunga luti á hendr í léggöldum ok skriptum, er at þf brugðu stórum] - Bsk I, 106

⁶ [rauf þau rað oll á sínum dogum, sem hann vissi at ólógum ráðin vera, hvárt sem lut áttu í meiri menn eðr minni] - Bsk I, 107

great good fortune from God in both wealth and prestige should have more indulgence for not refraining from disobedient acts¹

Phraseology of this sort is the stuff of hagiographies but it is significant that the author chose to highlight the reforming aspect of St Þorlákr's sanctity and that he draws attention to the saint's particular interest in enforcing church-law on incest.

This general impression given by the A version of *Þorláks saga* is supported by other evidence. One of two letters Archbishop Eysteinn sent to Iceland after St Þorlákr became bishop datable to 1179x88 seems to be written on request after St Þorlákr had managed to have some law accepted but feared that it would not survive the procedure whereby new laws only became permanent laws if they were announced at three consecutive Alþings.² The archbishop explains in his letter that he had received letters from Bishop Þorlákr where he reported that he had advocated 'God's commands' for the Icelanders as the archbishop had instructed him. The Icelanders had been positive and Þorlákr had expressed his optimism that God's glory was definitely on the increase in Iceland. There were however those who had grumbled over novelties replacing age-old custom and to these the archbishop pointed out that with that sort of attitude they would never have accepted Christianity in the first place. The thrust of the archbishop's argument is however for the different nature of church law. St Þorlákr's 'novelties' seem to have been accepted like any other law and may have been in danger of not surviving the three-year trial period. The archbishop pointed out that church law was God's law and as a consequence not equivalent to ordinary secular law. It was therefore to be accepted without reservation and for perpetuity and was not to be subject to any trials by human beings.³ It is not apparent that this important distinction made any headway among Icelandic legislators until the latter part of the 13th century.

The only laws St Þorlákr is known to have initiated are stricter rules on fasting and the inclusion of the feast days of St Ambrose, St Cecilia and St Agnes in the calendar of the Icelandic church at the expense of two days in the week after Whitsun.⁴

It is however not likely that it was this sort of legislation which the archbishop was referring to, although stricter fasting may of course have encountered opposition. In another, possibly earlier letter, datable to 1179x81 the archbishop specifically addresses the chieftains Jón Loftsson and Gizurr Hallsson and admonished them for the promiscuity which is condoned in Iceland. He accuses them of being involved in sinful

¹ I am indebted to Peter Foote for help with this translation. [Eigi varð hann við suma menn né höfðingja með öllu samhuga, því at hann samþykki þat eitt við þa, er val samdi. Þottu honum þat miklu meira miðriall guðs kristni, el gótgum monnum galust storr lutt yrir. Virði hann ok við þa eigi meir vorkunn, at hepta sik eigi at ólyðnum lutum, er aðr höfðu bæði mikít lan af guði í auðætum ok mannvirðingum.] - Bsk I, 107

² Grg I a, 37. On this see Grg III, s v nýmæli, Helgi Skuli Kjartansson 1986b 7-9

³ The letter survives only in a 15th century Icelandic translation - DI I, 259-60

⁴ Sturl, 109, Bsk I, 106, Grg 1b, 250-51 Grg III, 79. The B version also claims he changed rules regarding confession but it is unlikely that these had the force of law - Bsk I, 277

unions and asks them how the populace can be persuaded to improve if the chieftains' example is so wicked. After briefly referring to the unacceptability of clerics bearing arms he appeals to the chieftains to support the discipline of the bishops over the masses. He asks them to see to it that an arrangement is made so that the bishops can impose fines for moral offences (*at sektar se settar til biskupa soknar vm kristne spell. þu hefer hann handa festing til hegningar*).¹ Exactly which offences these were is not transparent, but the context suggests that the archbishop was referring to sexual and marital offences in particular although his words may be interpreted as a claim to a separate jurisdiction in all matters which the church considered within its domain.

It was a long time before the church achieved that goal and there are no clear indications that St Þorlákr campaigned openly for a separate jurisdiction. There is, on the other hand, good evidence that he worked hard to establish the church's authority over marital and sexual matters. According to an annalistic clause in *Prestssaga Guðmundar* St Þorlákr forbade in 1183 a marriage between Þórðr Bǫðvarsson from Garðar (B) and Snælaug Hǫgnadóttir from Bær (B) because there were two impediments to their union. He forbade the union

with such strength of God that he went to the Law rock with his clerics and took oaths that this union was contrary to the law of God. He then named witnesses and dissolved the marriage and excommunicated everyone who had been involved.²

Oddaverja þáttur contains a much fuller account of this dispute and adds that after a long struggle the couple and their kinsmen finally agreed to the dissolution of the marriage and were absolved by St Þorlákr.³ *Oddaverja þáttur* has two further stories of St Þorlákr's chastisement of chieftains. Sveinn, son of Sturla in Hvammur, had taken as a concubine a relative of his wife and Jón Loptsson himself had as a concubine St Þorlákr's sister. It is not disclosed if Sveinn ever relented but Jón gave in after a long and dramatic dispute.⁴ It is likely that these stories are in essence true. Jón's relationship with St Þorlákr's sister is attested in other sources⁵ and Sveinn was clearly an indefatigable womaniser.⁶ It is however probably not a coincidence that the three stories represent the three main manifestations of promiscuity: incestuous marriage, illicit sexual union on account of affinity, and concubinage.

¹ The letter survives only in a 15th century Icelandic translation - DI I, 262-64

² [með svo miklu guðs trausti að hann gekk til Lögbergs með klerkasveit sína og lætur vinna eida að sa ráðahagur var í moti guðs lögum. Þá nefnir hann votta að og segir í [116] sundur ráðahagnum og forboðar þá alla er ráðið hotðu þessu] Sturl. 115-16. The Law rock was the place at the Alþing where public announcements were made - see Grg III, sv. Lögberg, Magnus Mar Larsson 1966a.

³ Bsk I, 284-88

⁴ Bsk I, 288-93

⁵ Sturl, 46

⁶ Sturl, 90, 109

That promiscuity weighed heavily on St Þorlákr's mind appears furthermore from his penitential where sexual offences of every description figure prominently.¹ He seems to have been campaigning for improved morals for most of his episcopacy; in one of two letters Archbishop Eiríkr Ívarsson (1189-1205) sent to Bishops Þorlákr and Brandr, datable to 1189x93, he sets out in considerable detail rules on bigamy, incest, fornication, affinity, divorce, defective spouses, betrothal and the woman's assent, elopement and inability to consummate a marriage. In this letter the Archbishop also repeats his predecessor's rules; forbidding clerics to bear arms and instructing them not to become involved in litigation on behalf of other than their needy relatives. He also told the bishops to chastise disobedient clerics with excommunication and, if that did not work, anathema. Just as the archbishop's long treatment of various aspects of promiscuity seems to be answers to questions the Icelandic bishops posed to him, so this ruling on chastisement of clerics seems to be a response to a query. That suggests that the Icelandic bishops were also trying to assert their authority over their clergy.

The other letter Archbishop Eiríkr sent to Bishops Þorlákr and Brandr informs them of decisions taken at a synod held in May 1190 and reasserts earlier decrees on clerical immunity and the ban on bearing arms and involvement in litigation. In this letter the archbishop adds a new rule it was henceforth forbidden to ordain men who were in positions of secular authority and held *godðorð*.²

The evidence assembled here suggests that St Þorlákr was an active promoter of the reform programme of the Norwegian archbishops in Iceland, but that he put particular emphasis on marital reform. There is no independent evidence that he campaigned against clerics bearing arms, *Sturlu sagas* account that he advised the priest Páll Sǫlvason to take up arms and defend himself against his adversaries is probably not an accurate reflection of his stance on the issue³ and he may well have enjoined his clergy to put their arms aside. It is however perfectly clear that, if he did, success was not immediate and as we shall see in ch. III 5.5 clerics were actively involved in armed conflict well into the 13th century. The same is true of clerical involvement in litigation; as long as ordained chieftains existed, priests continued to be a common sight in the secular courts. As to the rule banning the holders of *godðorð* from being ordained it does not seem to have been broken much and excuses may have been found for priests like Ketill Þorláksson (d. 1273) of the Hítðælir who probably owned a *godðorð*, although they may not have controlled it. As discussed in ch. III 5.1 there were however other reasons why the ordinations of chieftains decreased in the second half of

¹ DI I, 240-44, cf. Bsk I, 277. An English translation of the bulk of the text is found in McNeill & Gamer 1938: 355-57. See further Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1982a, 1982b; 1985a.

² This letter only survives in a 15th century Icelandic translation - DI I, 290-91.

³ Sturl. 97-98.

the 12th century. The archbishop was outlawing a practice which was already becoming outdated.

While this first wave of reform was not immediately successful in establishing the clear distinctions between secular and ordained of which its protagonists dreamed, it did sow the seeds for the growing sense of a shared identity which became apparent among high-born clerics in the first half of the 13th century (see ch. III 5.5). St Þorlákr does however seem to have had a remarkable influence in the field of sexual and marital regulation. There is no reason to suppose that such regulation had not been enforced before his times or that there was an actual measurable change in people's behaviour as a result of his campaign against promiscuity. The difference his struggle made was to have the church's authority over marital matters acknowledged.

The compilation of laws called *Grágás* represents Icelandic law as it was in the middle of the 13th century. These laws do not concede that the church had a separate jurisdiction and according to them the bishops had very limited powers and were not given any policing capacity over matters dealt with in the Christian law section. In the Betrothal section however the bishops are given a range of powers in matters relating to consanguinity and, in particular, separation.¹ There is nothing in the laws which suggests that the powers they give to the bishops were acknowledged in the days of St Þorlákr but the indications are that these laws are more recent than the late 12th century and therefore represent the fruits of St Þorlákr's labours. A limited acknowledgement of the bishops' right to fines for moral offences is the proviso that when couples, who were related in the fifth degree on one side and the sixth on the other, paid the capital tithe to the Law court for a permit to marry, the members of the court took six marks and the bishops received the surplus if there was any.² In cases of childbirth through incestuous or adulterous unions the bishop had an absolute right to a three mark fine provided he had earlier forbidden the relationship in question.³ This important acknowledgement of the bishop's right to impose fines for sexual transgressions may well have been pushed through after Archbishop Eysteinn's instruction to the chieftains in 1179x81 to arrange for the bishops to be able to impose fines for moral offences.⁴

The pivotal role the laws give to the bishops in divorce proceedings, as mediators and final arbiters, represents the greatest advance the bishops made in

¹ Grg Ia, 224²¹, 26, Grg Ib, 39²⁴, 40¹¹, 15, 41¹¹, 14, 16, 27, 42², 5-23, 43¹⁰⁻¹¹, 24, 27, 44¹⁶, 56⁴, 11-18, 59¹⁸, 61¹, Grg II, 165²², 173⁴, 6-8, 199¹⁹, 20, 200⁴

² Grg Ib, 60¹⁴-61⁴. The capital tithe was paid only once in a lifetime, either for a permit to wed a relative or for salvation. It was 10% of property value, while ordinary tithe was a 1% property tax. See Maurer 1874c.

³ Grg Ib, 56⁶-19. It may be these fines which the A version of *Þorláks saga* refers to when it claims that St Þorlákr never mixed the moneys which people paid for their transgressions together with other wealth but spent them on supporting married couples who were in danger of breaking up on account of poverty - Bsk I, 107.

⁴ Quoted above - DI I, 263

gaining influence over people's private lives. As *Þorláks saga* claims St Þorlákr put emphasis on supporting married couples and punishing divorcees¹ and it may be that he managed to have the legislation changed in his day but it could be argued on equally good grounds that the Betrothal section was not composed in the form we know it until the middle of the 13th century as it refers to the bishop's representative (*umboðsmaðr*), a term which is not attested until 1255²

Whatever the case, and this issue deserves a much closer scrutiny than has been attempted here, it is abundantly clear that St Þorlákr fought to establish the church's authority over people's personal and familial affairs and that in the long run at least he was successful. It is a matter for another study but the indications are that St Þorlákr's was not really such an uphill struggle. The extremely detailed way in which the laws deal with people's personal lives is suggestive of a society with a strong tradition of external regulation of familial matters. It may therefore have been entirely natural that the church took over the policing of the family and only had to overcome resistance from a small group of aristocrats who had previously lived by different norms from ordinary people.

St Þorlákr's successor as bishop of Skálholt, Páll Jónsson, was no reformer. He did continue his uncle's policies of separating illicit unions³ but he probably interpreted this as holding only for insignificant people. Páll was himself the fruit of Jón Loftsson's illicit love-affair with St Þorlákr's sister. His brother Sæmundr, the chieftain of the Oddaverjar, never married but had children by several concubines, one of whom was his second cousin.⁴ It is unlikely that Páll confronted his brother on this score and it is clear that aristocrats openly kept concubines into the middle of the 13th century without the church raising more than token objections and that children of such unions did retain the privileges aristocratic birth bestowed on them⁵

The political situation in Norway had changed when Páll went there for ordination in 1194. The new archbishop, Eiríkr Ívarsson, who had been elevated in 1189, was a much more aggressive man than his predecessor and he was soon at loggerheads with King Sverrir. Archbishop Eysteinn had supported the kingship of Magnús Erlingsson (1164-84) who was only of royal blood on his mother's side and had in turn secured important privileges for the Norwegian church.⁶ When the Faeroese priest Sverrir, who claimed he was the son of King Sigurðr *munnr* (1136-55), started his

¹ Quoted above - Bsk I, 106

² Grg 1b 5612, Sturl, 714. The same term is also used of the caretaker of a monastery in-between abbots in 1253 - Sturl, 617

³ Sturl, 178-79

⁴ Sturl, 46, 212-13

⁵ On concubinage in the 12th and 13th centuries see Auður G. Magnúsdóttir 1988. She stresses the political advantages to chieftains of having a large number of children as one of the main reasons why this practice was so widespread in Iceland.

⁶ DI I, 226-30. Helle 1964, 36-44

guerrilla war for the control of Norway the church stood firmly by the side of King Magnús and even after Sverrir had killed Magnús in 1184 and assumed control of the country it continued to oppose him. For most of his time as king, Sverrir (1185-1202) was not in firm control of his kingdom and Archbishop Eiríkr was active in his opposition to him and contrived to have Pope Celestine III excommunicate Sverrir in 1194; it was one of Innocent III's first tasks to place Sverrir's domain under interdict in 1198.¹

The origins of the disagreement between King Sverrir and the Norwegian church are complex but it became expressed as well-established bones of contention between church and state. As a result of the church's hostility, Sverrir became the champion of royal and secular control over ecclesiastical property and appointments, and he and his constituency began to look for and develop arguments against the reformers. A stance was created where the king and secular magnates were the defenders of the church against an irresponsible and greedy clergy who were not to be trusted to handle property or appointments, the reason being that the clergy were not answerable to God for their worldly responsibilities as the secular authorities were.²

To what extent the dispute between King Sverrir and the Norwegian church had reverberations within the Icelandic clergy is unclear. Sverrir clearly had supporters in Iceland; Abbot Karl Jónsson of Þingeyrar travelled to Norway in 1185 and wrote the first part of Sverrir's biography,³ and Pope Innocent III saw reason to write specially to Bishops Brandr and Páll in 1198 and warn them against associating with Sverrir, 'the excommunicate and apostate enemy of God and his saints on account of his deeds.'⁴ Whether the pope knew the bishops to be sympathetic to Sverrir's cause we cannot know, but the author of *Páls saga* was certainly proud on behalf of his hero when after Christmas 1194 he

sought out the king with his retinue, and there was then a great number of the king's men with him, but the king received him as well as if it was his son or brother who had come to his side, and enhanced his honour and dignity as he would have asked himself or his friends. The thing was that he [Sverrir] was more capable than most men and had greater ability and did everything in his power, which was beneficial, so that the honour of them both might become greater.⁵

¹ Sv, 129 as in Lat dok, 102 and Lat dok, 118-22

² Sverrir's views are spelled out in a pamphlet issued in his defence after the excommunication of 1194, printed in En tale

³ IBS I, 391-93

⁴ | Sverro, et excommunicato et apostata: Deo et sanctis ejus pro suis actibus inimico] - DI I, 300

⁵ | á fund konungs með sinu forneyti, ok þa með honum fjöldi konungsmanna, en konungr tók sva vel við honum, sem sonr hans eðr bróðir væri til handa honum kominn, ok gjörði svá mikla tign hans ok virðing, sem hann mundi sjálftr kjósa, eðr hans vinur, en bæði var, at hann kunni betr en flestir menn aðrir ok hatði betri læri á, ok sló ollu við, því er til gæða var, er þeir mætti bæði gófgastir af verða.] - Bsk I, 129

After staying with Sverrir well into Lent, Páll sought out the exiled archbishop in Denmark and was consecrated in Lund. Páll then went back to Norway and again he met Sverrir

and stayed with him until he returned to Iceland in the summer, and the [king] respected him the more in all aspects the longer he stayed with him and the better he knew him ¹

It is clear that Sverrir was popular in Iceland and that he got a good press among Icelandic writers, the author of *Páls saga* was clearly an ardent admirer. He obviously did not feel that his hero's association with this excommunicate who had died unabsolved was anything to be ashamed of. Although there is little direct evidence for it, the indications are that Bishop Páll and his successor Magnús Gizurarson ascribed to Sverrir's view of the relationship between church and secular power. We have seen how Páll referred an important decision like selecting a bishop elect for Hólar to his brother Sæmundr, the chieftain of their family. Another example of his accommodating attitude to secular authority is that, when he went to Norway to be consecrated, his brother Sæmundr lent him money and received instead the right to collect the bishop's quarter of the tithes from a certain number of farmsteads around the familial estate in Oddi. The Oddaverjar were still collecting these tithes in 1273 when, disgusted by Bishop Árni's attempt to take them back, they appealed to the archbishop.² If not because of conviction or familial pressure, Bishops Páll and Magnús probably adopted Sverrir's view because of their total lack of common ground with Bishop Guðmundr *góði*.

Guðmundr *góði*'s father was killed in 1166 defending Earl Erlingr, father of King Magnús and regent of Norway³ and Guðmundr's family seems to have supported the cause of King Magnús and his successors in opposing King Sverrir.⁴ Guðmundr had been put to study because he was illegitimate and had no inheritance coming to him and he owed his elevation to the see of Hólar entirely to his success as a popular and miracle-working priest. He had therefore every reason to come out on the side of the reformers. Matters were probably cooling somewhat when he came to Norway for consecration a year after King Sverrir's death but if he had not already committed himself to the reforming stance it is likely that Archbishop Eiríkr took care to instruct him.⁵

Bishop Guðmundr (1203-37) is probably the most debated figure in Icelandic medieval history. Historians have felt that his influence was profound and the debate has raged about to what extent he was responsible for the increased authority of the

¹ | ok var með honum unz hann fór til Íslands hit sama sumar, ok tignaði [konúngr] hann því meir í öllum hlutum, sem hann hafði lengr með honum vent, ok hann kunni hann gjorr] - Bsk I, 130

² AB, 35-36

³ Sturl, 104-105, ÍF XXVIII, 409

⁴ As in Qgmundr Þorvarðarson's appeal to Jón *kuflungr* - Sturl, 120

⁵ Bsk I, 485 ln 3

Norwegian king.¹ That question is losing its momentum as the search for scapegoats falters but it remains that Guðmundr *góði* was a most curious man. When Guðmundr was chosen by Kolbeinn Tumason to be the next bishop of Hólar it was his religious fervour and total lack of any statesmanlike qualities which made him a feasible candidate. Guðmundr had earlier shrunk from taking on any worldly responsibilities as he did when he refused to take control over the *staðr* at Vellir (E) in 1196.² Kolbeinn was therefore justified in thinking that Guðmundr would allow him to control the diocese's finances. It quickly transpired that, inept as he was, Guðmundr was nevertheless going to make full use of the powers which being bishop bestowed upon him.

The first sticking point was control over the everyday running of the see and the diocese's revenues. Prior to Guðmundr's appointment men had always been chosen as bishops who could be trusted to manage the considerable wealth one diocese turned over. They could come in for criticism, as Bishop Klængr did for extravagance, but on the whole the chieftains had not interfered with them directly. The bishops on the other hand seem always to have tolerated the fact that the chieftains monitored their management of the sees. There was therefore an understanding that the chieftains had a certain right to review the management of the dioceses and that in turn for acknowledging this the bishops were in practice allowed to manage the affairs of their diocese on their own.

It was Kolbeinn Tumason who attempted an innovative arrangement by the appointment of an ascetic who, as such, was not supposed even to be interested in management. While Guðmundr *góði* probably had no great interest in financial matters he had no intention of being a puppet of Kolbeinn. He himself was probably in no doubt of his right and in the short periods when he was in control of the see he seems to have depleted the revenues without much consideration for the see's financial health. Guðmundr took an uncompromising stance on charity. This meant giving everyone who asked everything he had. He was therefore always surrounded by several hundreds of what householders would consider undesirable characters.

It was spending money on an uncontrollable crowd of beggars and vagabonds which really made the householders' blood run cold. Excessive expenditure was bad but encouraging sloth was positively horrific and Guðmundr's image became inextricably linked with the mob that followed him everywhere he went. As we discussed in ch. III 2.3, control of poverty was a fundamental concern of the

¹ Magnus Jonsson 1921b, 1941, Magnus Helgason 1931a, Benjamin Kristjansson 1937, Bjorn Sigtússon 1937, Guðbrandur Jónsson 1940b, Sigurður Nordal 1942 318-20, Flosi Sigurbjörnsson 1951, Björn Þorsteinsson 1951, 1953 276-85, 1978 147-52, Jón Johannesson 1956 236-253, Magnús Már Lárusson 1960g, Simpson 1973, Magnus Stefánsson 1975 119-36, Jón Margeirsson 1985, Erlingur Sigtryggsson 1986

² Sturl, 173

householding class and Guðmundr's conduct was therefore not only irresponsible but directly menacing to the social order. Unlimited charity was of course not a priority of the reformers but Guðmundr's insistence on it played into the hands of those who saw themselves as defenders of the old order. They had long since pointed out that the so-called reformers were nothing but a group of greedy and irresponsible clergy taking advantage of the trust good men had placed in them.¹

After his defeat in the battle of Hólar in 1209 Bishop Guðmundr was never in real control of the finances of his diocese, although he often managed to command enough resources to maintain a large following on his wanderings. He never retracted from any of his demands and although his authority was largely ineffective in the last 28 years of his 34-year episcopacy he was sufficiently influential to maintain his status as the leader of the reform movement in Iceland.

From the reformers' point of view Bishop Guðmundr was the worst agent they could hope for. His contribution to the reform was mainly an exercise in relentless obstinacy; he never really managed to fight for actual changes but was sufficiently menacing to stimulate a strong and coherent opposition to himself and the ideals he was seen to represent, both within the church and among the secular magnates.

In his honeymoon period before the battle of Hólar in 1209 Bishop Guðmundr did try to assert his authority, in particular with regard to the church's jurisdiction over its clerics. *Íslendinga saga* gives the particulars of two cases; both concerned clerics who were being prosecuted by Kolbeinn and who sought the aid of Bishop Guðmundr. In 1205 the priest Ásbjörn asked Guðmundr for protection from Kolbeinn who accused him of non-payments of debts. While the court was in session Guðmundr came there and forbade them to try the priest. He was nevertheless tried and sentenced. As a result Bishop Guðmundr banned Kolbeinn and those who had been involved in the litigation from religious services and took the priest under his protection. The priest's wife gave Kolbeinn money in order that he should leave their farmstead alone. Later in the year Kolbeinn went to Hólar and laid a summons on Guðmundr's servants for association with his outlaw. Bishop Guðmundr excommunicated Kolbeinn instead. At this point their friends intervened and a settlement was reached whereby Kolbeinn agreed that Bishop Guðmundr would judge alone. The householders of the region promised to pay whatever fines Guðmundr imposed on Kolbeinn. At the following Alþing Bishop Guðmundr took counsel with Bishop Páll and his brother Sæmundr in Oddi and then pronounced a heavy fine on Kolbeinn. The fine was never paid in full because the bishop insisted that Kolbeinn should deliver the fine himself while Kolbeinn claimed that Guðmundr should collect from the householders who had promised to pay.²

¹ En tale, 2-3 6-7

² Sturl 214

In this first round Guðmundr had forced at least a partial acknowledgement of his jurisdiction but the war was far from over. In the summer of 1206 he excommunicated the chieftains Sigurðr Ormsson in Moðruvellir in Horgárdalur (E) and Hallr Kleppjárnsson in Grund (E) because they had forcibly taken a man from a monastery where he had sought refuge, beaten him up and amputated a limb. Kolbeinn was soon known to have associated with Sigurðr and Hallr and the three put a trade-embargo on the see. By the autumn Sigurðr and Hallr gave in and agreed on Bishop Guðmundr's self-judgement. Kolbeinn was not however involved in the settlement and before Christmas Bishop Guðmundr had excommunicated him again, this time for associating with excommunicates and for not paying the fines from the previous dispute. After Easter 1207 Kolbeinn came to Hólar and laid a summons on the members of the household for a variety of minor offences. The bishop again read his excommunication over Kolbeinn. In the spring Kolbeinn assembled his men and Þorvaldr Gizurarson of the Haukdælir came to his aid and together they prosecuted the bishop's men at the spring assembly in Hegranes (Sk). Again friends of both parties mediated and a settlement was reached whereby the archbishop should judge in the dispute, Kolbeinn should retract all his litigation and Bishop Guðmundr should lift the excommunication.

Again Bishop Guðmundr was partially successful but the dispute never reached the archbishop. In the following year there seem to have been a series of minor disputes between Bishop Guðmundr and Kolbeinn's followers:

The bishop habitually brought actions against Kolbeinn's men on various charges like tithes-cases, management of church property or the maintenance of their poor relatives. The householders reacted with displeasure and it seemed to them that the bishop would leave no one in peace.¹

It was Guðmundr's inability to select his targets tactfully which was soon to be his downfall. He seems to have quickly forfeited any sympathy he might have had among the local householders and without it he was easy prey for Kolbeinn. In 1208 Kolbeinn was pursuing an acolyte who had fathered a child. The mother's brothers wanted compensation and had handed the case over to Kolbeinn. The acolyte for his part sought the protection of Bishop Guðmundr. Guðmundr offered to pay compensation but Kolbeinn refused any settlement, claiming that the bishop broke every truce. The case then took a familiar course, Kolbeinn had the acolyte convicted at the spring assembly and Bishop Guðmundr excluded Kolbeinn and his accomplices from services. Kolbeinn together with Sigurðr Ormsson then confiscated the property of the acolyte and the bishop in turn excommunicated them both. At the following Alþing many

¹ [Biskup hafði jafnan Kolbeins menn fyrir sökum um ýmsa hluti, tíundamál eða kirkjujarhald og um viðtöku við láteka frændur sína. Bændur töku því þunglega og virtu sem engir mættu vera í friði fyrir biskupi.] - Sturl, 216

people associated with Kolbeinn and Sigurðr and they convicted six of Bishop Guðmundr's household members for aiding their outlaw. Kolbeinn again assembled a host and was going to march on Hólar to confiscate the property of those he had convicted. This time Bishop Guðmundr and his men fled the see, but when he returned Kolbeinn had joined forces with his brother Arnórr, Sigurðr and Hallr. The day after Guðmundr came to Hólar Kolbeinn attacked but was himself killed and his army put to flight.¹

The following spring a coalition of most of the more prominent chieftains in the country marched on Hólar and dispersed Guðmundr's following and captured the bishop himself.² After this Bishop Guðmundr was never in a position to advance his claim to jurisdiction over clerics, or any other reforming claims for that matter.

The author of *Páls saga* was initially happy with Bishop Guðmundr because his abhorrent behaviour showed Bishop Páll in such a good light,³ but when it came to describing their relationship he was clearly irritated by Bishop Guðmundr's conduct, which put Bishop Páll in an awkward position

because the archbishop had sent him letters under his seal, telling him to support and assist the cause of Bishop Guðmundr as well as he could, but many of Bishop Páll's dearest friends, his relatives and in-laws supported Kolbeinn⁴

The author claims that, although Bishop Páll was horrified by Bishop Guðmundr's aggressive politics and liberal use of the weapon of excommunication, he tried all that he could to mediate; he dissuaded the chieftains from mounting an expedition against Guðmundr immediately after Kolbeinn's fall and sent his chaplain to Bishop Guðmundr to mediate a settlement. The stubborn Guðmundr had refused to budge an inch and accused Páll of siding with the chieftains. To the author of *Páls saga* the battle of Hólar was a divine judgement:

But it soon became clear, which of them [Páll or Guðmundr] had been wiser in their strategy, because in that same year chieftains went to Hólar and ousted Bishop Guðmundr from his see and chased away a large number of villains who were found there - outlaws, robbers and bandits - and killed some of them and this garrison of wickedness was thereby dissolved and from then on people's fortune improved.⁵

¹ Sturl, 214-19

² Sturl, 220-24

³ Bsk I 136

⁴ [Því erkebiskup hafði sent honum bréf sín með innsiglium, at hann skyldi styðja og styrkja, eptir því sem hann hefði fengið og færi á, mál Guðmundar biskups, en Kolbeins mál studdu margir astvinir Páls biskups, ok frændr ok tengdamenn] - Bsk I, 141

⁵ [En þat sýndist þá bratt, með hvern vísku at var hvers þeirra forsjá, at því at á sama ári fóru höfðingjar til Hóla ok ráku Guðmund biskup at stólnum, ok ruddu á braut ljolda illþýðis, er þar var sekir menn ok ransmenn ok reyfarar, ok drapu suma, ok varð þá að rjúfast sú illingaseta, ok urðu þá ok þaðan frá góð forlog manna] - Bsk I, 142

It does not seem that Bishop Páll opposed the operation which removed Bishop Guðmundr from his see and he was no doubt relieved by its successful outcome because it allowed him to disassociate himself completely from Bishop Guðmundr.

Bishop Páll seems to have supported his colleague in his claim to jurisdiction over the priest Ásbjörn in 1206, although how active this support was we cannot know. It was Bishop Guðmundr himself who, by his uncompromising tactics, provided the excuse for Bishop Páll and his successor Magnús Gizurarson (1216-37) to distance themselves from him and his policies.

There can hardly be disagreement that Guðmundr *góði* was not a competent politician and the polarisation his conduct caused within the Icelandic church had more to do with his methods than his policies. Bishops Páll and Magnús were clearly no reformers and neither seems to have attempted to increase the influence of the church in any way but their defensive position was created and maintained by the aggression of Bishop Guðmundr and was not a continuation of an older order. In the 12th century the bishops had been able to further the cause of the church in relative harmony with the secular powers and even a slightly irritating St Þorlákr did not manage to cause noticeable apprehension. Páll Jónsson's appointment to Skálholt in 1194 may have been a sign of unease among the southern chieftains but it was only after Guðmundr *góði* became bishop that it became clear where the battle-lines lay

The appointment of Magnús Gizurarson was clearly a reaction to Bishop Guðmundr. There can hardly be talk of a reactionary movement however, because although it did help to create certain views on church and society, his episcopacy is notable mainly for his inaction. The main consequence of Bishop Guðmundr's attempts at reform was that the development of episcopal power in Iceland was put on hold for 30 years or more. It was not until Norwegian bishops arrived at both sees in 1239 that real changes began to be implemented, but in the meantime the social status of priests had been through important changes, and it is to these we turn in ch. III 5.

III 4.4 *Episcopal administration*

A short note will suffice on episcopal administration and its development. We know next to nothing about how the bishops executed their duties and what little we know suggests that their administration was very simple indeed and that it did not increase significantly in complexity or size until the late 13th century

The law required that the bishops visit every commune regularly; the bishop of Skálholt was to visit one of three quarters in his diocese every year while the bishop of Hólar was to cover his diocese every year. While on visitation the bishops confirmed

children, gave absolution in reserved cases and consecrated churches and this was presumably the principal means they had to communicate with their clergy.¹ There is good evidence that in the late 12th century at least the bishops went on visitations although whether they did so as regularly as the law required is unknown.² The bishops each had a seat in the Law court and a special court for priests convened at the Alþing.³ It seems that in connection with the Alþing a meeting of priests and bishop sometimes took place (*prestastefna*) but whether this can be called a synod is uncertain.⁴ According to *Þorláks saga* St Þorlákr summoned clerics to Skálholt before major feasts and told them 'what each was to do so that everything was performed beautifully in the eyes of God, which they were duty bound to do.'⁵ By 1255 the bishops had representatives in at least the more remote parts of their dioceses⁶ and these seem to have been the forerunners of the rural deans who began to appear in the late 13th century.⁷

All the bishops seem to have had a chaplain and it seems that everyday administration of the cathedral establishments was run by this chaplain alone, possibly aided by a scribe.⁸ The exact tasks of the chaplains are difficult to define; they seem

¹ Grg Ia, 19+22

² Jakob Benediktsson 1976a

³ Grg Ia, 21110, Grg Ia, 2121-30

⁴ Bsk I, 234, Bysp I, 102, cf. LS, 105, DI II, 515, 540, 712, 795, 800, III, 129, Jakob Benediktsson 1972c

⁵ [. . . hvat hverr skyldi at gera þess er allt vörð fagrliga framit í guðs auglitu, þat er þeir váru skyldir til] - Bsk I, 102

⁶ Sturl, 714

⁷ For Norway see Seip 1942 67-81 Also Hamre 1968a

⁸ In Skálholt Þorkell *trandill* may have been the chaplain of Bishop Gizurr (Bsk I, 172) succeeded by Tjörvi who served Bishops Gizurr, Þorlákr and Magnus and died with the last in the fire at Hitardalur (B) in 1148 (Bysp I, 95-96, 104). It is not known who served Bishop Klængr but St Þorlákr was served by Ormr Eyjólfsson (d. 1205) who later served Bishop Brandr in Hólar (Bsk I, 111 (297), 114-15 (303), 292-93, 302-303, 425, 451, 489, Bysp I, 8, IA, 122, IFI, 216, ÍF VII, 116). Bishop Páll was served by a number of chaplains in succession, Þorkell Hallsson was first - he later became a canon in Þykkvibær (Bsk I, 129, 140, cf. Steinn Dofri 1941 231), next was Leggr Torfason from Lundur (B) for seven years - he later became a prior and died in 1238 (Bsk I, 140, Sturl, 90-91, 329, DI I, 498, Ob Isl, 23, 84, 86 cf. 26, IA, 130, 188, 327). The third chaplain of Bishop Páll was Björn who had been fostered by Bishop Brandr in Hólar and it has been suggested (DI I, 523-31) that he is the same as Ríta-Björn who became abbot of Niðarhólmur in Norway in 1232 and was appointed as papal envoy to Iceland in 1243 (d. 1244) (Bsk I, 138, 140, 142, cf. 326, On Ríta-Björn IA, 127, 129, 131, 189, DI I, 721-22, HakAM81afol, 486, 487, 489-91, 500, 502, 519, 530, 543, 586). The fourth chaplain to serve Bishop Páll was Brandr Dálksson who had earlier been chaplain of Bishops Guðmundr and Brandr in Hólar (d. 1225) (Bsk I, 140, 192, 446, 481, IA, 24, 64, 127, 186, 326). Bishop Páll's last chaplain was Ketill Hermundarson of the Gilsbekkingar and he acted as officialis after Páll's death. He became abbot of Helgafell in 1217 and died in 1220 (Bsk I, 140, DI I, 350, IA, 23, 63, 125, Bsk I, 515, IA, 125, 185, 326, Ob Isl, 86, 90, Hannes Þorsteinsson 1912 338-50). It is not known who were chaplains under Bishops Magnús, Sigvarðr or Árni, but the last had a scribe called Hallr (ÁB, 45).

In Hólar the Frenchman Ríkinn was St Jón's chaplain and *erkiprestr* (arch-priest - this is the only instance of the use of the term in an Icelandic source - it is common in Norwegian sources; Molland 1976c) (Bsk I, 168, (239), 173 (246), 173-74 (247), 239-40) and St Jón also had a scribe called Þorgeirr (Bsk I, 191-92). Klængr Þorsteinsson served under Bishops Ketill and Björn before he became bishop himself (Bysp I, 106, Bsk I, 240-41). Ormr Eyjólfsson may have served under Bishop Brandr before Brandr Dálksson who continued to serve under Bishop Guðmundr for a few years before he fled to Bishop Páll. Kygn-Björn was a scribe at Hólar in 1201-1202 but it is not clear whether he belonged to

simply to have been personal assistants to the bishops and may have had a wide range of responsibilities. The economic side of the see's management does not however seem to have been within their remit.

In *Jóns saga* there is a description of the household at Hólar in the days of St Jón (1106-22). Bishop Jón selected men to oversee the management of the see and its properties together with 'the noble lady he had previously had as wife.' Highest ranking of these was a priest called Hámundr Bjarnason and his second in command was another called Hjalti who was a relative of the bishop. The highest ranking layman was a man of 'noble lineage', Orm son of Þorkell of Víðimýri (Sk), which suggests that the local chieftains had a say in the running of the see from the outset.¹

These men took care of most of the things which concerned the cathedral establishment and allocated tasks to others, some conveyed those things to the see which were needed, some were put to work and others to serve poor men and some to receive guests, because at every least one hundred and sometimes two hundred or even more called on the bishop²

In 1211, when Bishop Páll died, the priest Þórir was responsible for the see's finances³ and he seems to have had a similar position as Hámundr and Hjalti had had at Hólar a century earlier, if brother Gunnlaugr is to be believed about their tasks. On 13 January 1202 the steward (*bryti*) at Hólar - a layman it seems - explained to Guðmundr góði, who was then bishop elect, how he had estimated the amount of food which would be needed for Christmas⁴. At a later date, in the 1250s, other large households, like Kirkjubær (SV), Reykholt (B) and Flugumýri (Sk), also had stewards.⁵ In the 14th century the *bryti* was the second in command, after the *ráðsmaðr*, and then as earlier it seems to have been common that the wife of one or the other was matron (*ráðskona*).⁶

The episcopal household was therefore divided in two sections, on the one hand there was the chaplain and possibly a scribe who advised the bishops and presumably supervised the writing of letters and the keeping of records. The indications are that until the times of Bishops Ární (1269-98) and Jörundr (1267-1313) the bureaucratic aspect of the bishops' administration remained simple and that records were neither made nor stored in a systematic way.⁷ The other aspect of running a diocese was estate management and this seems to have required considerably more manpower and

the episcopal household or Kolbeinn Tumason's (see ch III 5.5.1). A number of clerics were attached to Bishop Guðmundr but their formal status is never clear in the sources. In 1255 a priest from Hólar sang mass at a dependent church but he seems to have been of relatively low rank - Sturl, 711-12

¹ Bsk I, 167 (239), 203

² [Þessir menn önnuðust mest þat er til staðarins kom, ok skipuðu monnum til sýslu, sumum til atflutningar við staðinn um þá luti er þurfa. Sumir voru settir til verknaðar, sumir at þjóna látækum monnum - sumir at taka við gesti- [108]um, því at á hverri hátið sóttu menn á fund biskups, C manna eða stundum C C, eða nokkru fleiri] - Bsk I, 167-68

³ Bsk I, 143

⁴ Sturl, 203

⁵ Sturl, 554, 564, 592, 636, 640

⁶ LS, 86, Bsk I, 143

⁷ See ch I 3.6, Orm Vésteinsson 1994 628-32

involved both priests and laymen in managerial positions. It is not clear whether the estate management was always headed by a priest; in 1238 when the see of Hólar was vacant the layman Kolbeinn Arnórsson was there to oversee its management but that may have been because of the special circumstances of Bishop Guðmundr's episcopacy.¹ Loptr Helgason (d. 1317) who was *ráðsmaðr* in Skálholt in 1280 was a layman and so was probably his predecessor Jón Skúmsson, while the *ráðsmaðr* at Hólar under Bishop Jǫrundr and later under Bishop Laurentius was the priest Skúli Ingason and his predecessor was the priest Haflíði Steinsson.² In the later middle ages this varied.³

A third aspect we would expect is the liturgical function of the cathedral. In the later middle ages this aspect is represented by the *kirkjuprestr* (church-priest) at the cathedral and eight to twelve clerics serving the altars.⁴ There is no direct evidence for this sort of cleric in our period but they may of course have existed nevertheless. The sources commonly refer to the bishops with their clerics and master Gísli, the Latin teacher from Gotland at Hólar, was appointed by St Jón to govern the clerics as well as teach them.⁵ According to one of the annals Bishop Jǫrundr acquired permission from the archbishop to establish a chapter at the cathedral at Hólar when he became bishop in 1267.⁶ It is not known whether this chapter ever came into existence and traces of it in the later middle ages are not distinct⁷ but the idea suggests that there was already a number of clerics permanently attached to the cathedral.

The only responsibility of the bishops on which we have some information is the education of priests.⁸ The majority of priests seem to have been educated by older priests at individual churches; either through fosterage or through a commitment to serve the church where they had been educated.⁹ Education was also available in the monasteries although how many trod this path and whether they became priests is uncertain.¹⁰ Schools were operated at the cathedrals although whether they were always functional is unclear. In *Jóns saga* brother Gunnlaugr describes the excellent school St Jón established in Hólar in the beginning of the 12th century, headed by a

¹ Sturl. 408

² LS, 67, 86

³ AB 16-74 IA, 287, DI III, 405-19, 428, 429-31 DI IV, 417-19, 437-38, 474-75

⁴ IA 286, 287, DI IV, 381, 421-22, DI V, 360

⁵ Bsk I, 235, Sturl. 115 (*klerkasveit*) Bysp I 96 (*lærðir menn Þorláks*). In 1275 a priest called Þorsteinn *juraprestr* resided in the cathedral at Hólar and guarded the vestments and rang the bells - Bsk I, 609. It is likely that he was only one of a number of clerics attached to the cathedral.

⁶ IA, 331

⁷ Magnus Mar Larusson 1958b maintains that there was a chapter in Hólar at least in the 15th century. He also points out that Jǫrundr's permission to establish a chapter may be a misrepresentation for a go-ahead to establish the house of canons at Møðruvellir in Horgardalur (E).

⁸ Janus Jonsson 1893, Benjamin Kristjánsson 1947, Jón Johannesson 1956: 187-91, Magnus Mar Larusson 1963d, 1967c: 121-28, Jakob Benediktsson 1970c, Sverrir Tómasson 1988a: 19-35

⁹ IF I, 20, Bsk I, 90, 107, 153 (219), Sturl. 118, Grg Ia 1719-192

¹⁰ Bsk I 193 AB 6

master from Gotland and where the French chaplain taught liturgical chant.¹ The description may to some extent be brother Gunnlaugr's flight of fancy but there is no reason to doubt that St Jón attempted to establish a permanent school providing more than rudimentary education. It is not known what came of this establishment - brother Gunnlaugr's approach to his subject suggests that the arrangements in his own day were less magnificent - and Bishops Klængr and Þorlákr seem to have done the teaching themselves although the context does not preclude that there were permanent schoolmasters at Skálholt in their time.² In 1218 when Bishop Guðmundr returned to Iceland after four years in Norway he established a school at Hólar and had as a master one Þórðr *ufsi* who may have been a Norwegian imported for the purpose. Guðmundr had not long been at Hólar before Arnórr Tumason assembled his men and took the bishop into captivity and chased both the schoolmaster and the students away from the see and threatened to burn the schoolhouse. Master Þórðr then went to Vellir in Svarfaðardalur (E) and taught his pupils there over the winter.³ Nothing more is known about Master Þórðr but later in the 13th century boys were still being taught in Vellir,⁴ but this was probably common at major ecclesiastical centres like Vellir. In the 1270s a school was operating at Hólar under a master Óblauðr⁵ and although this evidence is patchy it is reasonable to assume that some sort of schooling was normally available at both sees throughout our period.

It seems then that throughout our period episcopal administration remained simple, the running of the bishops' estates and the education of priests being the most conspicuous aspects. This had clearly changed by the last quarter of the 13th century when supervision of ecclesiastical property and of the execution of pastoral responsibilities had become a priority for the bishops. This change was accompanied by a sharp increase in the making of records and a new attitude towards their storage and use. These changes were the result of a clearer sense of self-consciousness within the church which in turn was affected by changing social conditions which motivated the development of an institutional church.

¹ Bsk I, 163-64, 168 (235-36, 239-41)

² Bysp I, 111, Bsk I, 103

³ Sturl, 257

⁴ LS, 8 Hermann Pálsson 1959: 18-19

⁵ LS 9-10

III 5. The Priests

III 5.1 *Shortage of priests in the 12th century*

In the Old Christian law section there is a clause which describes how a church owner can take on young boys, have them educated and ordained as priests at his own expense, and they in turn are bound to serve his church for the rest of their lives, unless they educate another priest in their place. If such a priest ran away, consorting with him incurred the same penalties as consorting with an outlaw. If he became sick it was up to the employer whether he sustained the priest or handed him over to his relatives. When this type of priest died the church and its guardian were to inherit 3 hundreds (= 3 cows or more), and only if he owned more would his relatives inherit from him.¹ From this one could only describe the status of such Icelandic priests as unfree and servile.

While chieftain-priests are well attested in the non-legal sources, mention is nowhere made in them of the servile type of priest.² That does not mean such servile-priests did not exist, our sources - that is *Sturlunga saga* and the sagas of bishops - are not concerned with people of that calibre. Nevertheless it makes it awkward to build grand theories on this legal provision and considering that there are over 400 priests known to us in Iceland up to 1300, none of whom can be shown to have lived this kind of life, we cannot suggest that these servile-priests were in any way characteristic of the condition of Icelandic priests

Depending on which view people take of slavery in Iceland in the high middle ages³ this clause can either be seen as a legal exercise aimed at creating a lowest rank of personal rights for clerics comparable to, the possibly equally fictional, secular slaves. Or it can be seen as a natural response by a legal expert to the perceived formation of a new class of people. It may be that church owners were pressing for a cheap and efficient way of running their churches, perhaps when it was no longer in vogue for them to be priests themselves, or this may be indicative of the church's concern over shortage of priests, a concern which it sought to alleviate by offering desolate youngsters this opportunity of a semi-respectable position, even if it meant that they gave away their freedom.

The last option deserves more consideration because it can be supported by other evidence for a persistent shortage of priests. Between 1148 and 1152, when the

¹ Grg 1a, 1719-192 The idea of servile priests is integrated into the legislation Grg 1a, 789-10 - which indicates that someone took the servile aspect quite seriously

² Gunnar Karlsson 1975 22, Magnús Stefánsson 1975 80

³ Foote 1975 1977c, Anna Agnarsdóttir & Ragnar Árnason 1983, Karras 1988

episcopal seat at Skálholt was empty there seems to have been such an acute shortage of priests in the diocese that Bishop Björn from Hólar ordained many priests at the Alþing, among them St Þorlákr, and he can only have been 19 years at the time, and possibly younger (b. 1133).¹ Both Magnús Stefánsson and Arne Odd Johnsen have shown convincingly that as in many other places the Canon law requirement that priests should not be ordained until they were 30 was not heeded in Iceland in the Middle ages, whether it was known or not.² The reason was probably economic; society or its ecclesiastical institutions could not afford keeping able-bodied young men in lower orders for years on end and not putting them into service. Nevertheless those priests whose age of ordination is known had all reached 20 when they took their vows, and brilliant and promising as young Þorlákr undoubtedly was, ordaining teenagers and giving them a cure of souls can hardly have been regular practice, and can be seen as a sign of stress.

The author of *Þorláks saga* makes his hero fear ember days

because he regarded it as a grave responsibility to ordain men, who sought ordination over great distances, and whom he considered ill-fit, both on account of their lack of learning and in other ways not to his liking, but he did not want to refuse them, both on account of their poverty and because of those men who had given them instruction or sent their tokens³

We can assume that he had little choice in the matter, it was better to ordain unfit priests than none.

Among the troublemakers who gave cause for chieftains to dispute in Dalir in 1150 was Aðalríkr son of a foreign priest called Gunnvarðr. Three of the priest's children are named with the comment that they were useful men who sold their labour in summer.⁴ The priest's children clearly belonged to the lower end of the social scale, but Aðalríkr at least had powerful protectors because Oddi Þorgilsson from Staðarhóll took him under his protection and got him safely out of the country after he had killed a householder without provocation. The indications are that the priest Gunnvarðr was active in pastoral care in Iceland in the first half of the 12th century, it seems with the support of the Staðarhólmenn, and possibly at Staðarhóll (SD) itself. It is of course not possible to infer much from a single example but considered in the context of other evidence for a shortage of priests in Iceland in the 12th century it seems likely that Gunnvarðr had gone, or been brought, to Iceland because of a lack of priests who could

¹ Bsk I, 91

² Johnsen 1979, Magnús Stefánsson 1984 296-302

³ [at honum þótti þat ábyrgðarráð mikit at vígja menn, er til þess sóttu lánan veg, ok hann sá þá mjök vantæra til, bæði sakir lítuls lærdoms ok annarra hatta, sér úskapfeldra, en hann nemtu þo varla at níta, bæði sakir Játækis þeirra sjálfra, ok fur sakir þeirra manna, er þeim höfðu kennt, eðr sínar jarðeinir höfðu til sent.] - Bsk I, 107, cf. ÍBS I, 271 where it is pointed out that this is a well known topos in hagiographic literature. Such observations, while undoubtedly correct, normally fail to appreciate that there must have been a reason why some topos were included and not others

⁴ [Þeir voru þniflegir menn og fóru með verkkaup um sumrum] - Sturl, 53

give service to the rapidly growing numbers of householders who wanted to provide a tithe-paying congregation with regular services. The social station of Gunnvarðr's children suggests that foreign priests were not likely to become economically independent or be able to acquire social respectability for themselves or their kin.

From the time of his ordination as priest in 1185 until his election to the see of Hólar in 1201 Guðmundr Arason served no less than seven ministries in a relatively restricted area in the vicinity of Hólar.¹ Guðmundr was no doubt an unusually distinguished and sought after cleric but that cannot have been the only reason why he seems to have had the choice of a range of ministries, all of them placed sufficiently close to Hólar for an ambitious cleric to keep himself involved and abreast of things. That so many ministries, some of them among the most exclusive in the country (notably Vellir in Svarfaðardalur (E) and Staður in Reynines (Sk)), were available to Guðmundr in the 17 years of his priesthood suggests that in this area at least householding priests had become rare and that in most ministries pastoral care was in the hands of district priests. It also suggests that there was not a great number of district priests available, or at least not suitable district priests.

Like St Þorlákr his successor to the see of Skálholt, Bishop Páll (1195-1211), also seems to have been concerned about a shortage of priests. The author of his saga tells us that Bishop Páll had the churches and priests in his diocese counted to know if he could allow his priests to go abroad without it affecting the services.² While some scholars have found this reason behind Bishop Páll's inventory unnecessarily unexciting,³ it is clear that the author was thoroughly acquainted with Bishop Páll's administration and it is therefore difficult to see why he should have chosen to be misleading on this point. Even if Icelandic priests were not going abroad in hordes it was a natural response to a shortage of priests to try first to prevent those who were already there from leaving their cures.

All this suggests that it would have been natural for the church to try to make arrangements for a steady supply of priests, but why it chose to solve it by inventing servile priests or if it ever worked we cannot say. It does however say something about

¹ Hól in Hólðastrond (Sk) 1185-87 (28 farmstead tithe area, *bændakirkja*), Miklibær in Óslandshlíð (Sk) 1187-89 (9 farmstead tithe area, *bændakirkja*), Viðvík (Sk) 1189-90 ([11] farmstead tithe area, *staðr*), Vellir in Svarfaðardalur (E) 1190-96 (30 farmstead tithe area, *staðr*), Úfsir in Svarfaðardalur (E) 1196-98 (15 farmstead tithe area, *bændakirkja*), Staður in Reynines (Sk) 1198-99 (14 farmstead tithe area, *staðr*), Viðimyri (Sk) 1199-1201 (12 farmstead tithe area, *bændakirkja*) - Bsk I, 430-66

² Bsk I, 136

³ Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1993: 83-89 points out that the 17th century manuscripts in which the inventory is preserved do not suggest that counting priests was its original function. He fails to appreciate that we do in fact not know what the original inventory looked like and while it can be argued convincingly that the preserved documents are ultimately derived from Bishop Páll's inventory there is nothing to suggest that they are a faithful rendering of it. Cf. Ólafur Larsson 1944: 131-32 who saw the need to count priests as a result of Icelandic priests flocking to richer ministries in Norway.

12th century attitudes to economic and social freedom that at least somebody thought this was viable.

The evidence for a shortage of priests in the 12th century presented here is far from conclusive, but there is absolutely no evidence to the contrary and it would be difficult to equate large numbers of priests with the evidence for the social make-up of the clergy in the late 12th century. The fact that in the early and middle 12th century many chieftains were ordained as priests or had their sons ordained would fit ill in a scenario where there was also a great number of priests of more humble origin. It is difficult to see why the chieftains should have wanted to become priests if it did not in some way give them a firmer grip on their followers/subordinates and an edge over their rivals. And it is unlikely that the chieftains could have achieved this if they were taking on roles which had already been played by some other class of people and with whom they would be in competition.

It makes much more sense to allow for a small number of missionary priests in the 11th century and possibly into the 12th, who were then gradually superseded by ordained chieftains. It seems that permanent ministries only began to be established in significant numbers in the first decades of the 12th century, as a result of the introduction of the tithe, and that these were dominated for a generation or two by chieftains or aristocratic householders. The success of the union between priesthood and chieftaincy will have prompted rich householders and others who aspired to power or influence to do the same, but when the immediate goal of the householders/chieftains to increase their influence or tighten their grip on their neighbours had been achieved they no longer needed to be seen to perform the services themselves and it began to suffice to be seen to provide these services. It is then that a demand for 'professional' priests will have arisen.

III 5.2 *Chieftain-priests in the 12th century*

The discussion of the evidence for priests in the 11th century in ch. II 3 revealed that as far as our sources can tell us there were very few priests in Iceland throughout the 11th century. It is only in the last quarter of that century that a small number of aristocratic householders like Sæmundr *fróði* in Oddi (R), Jón Qgmundarson in Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (R) later Bishop of Hólar, Teitr Ísleifsson in Haukadalur (Á), Þórðr Sölvason in Reykholt (B) and Illugi Bjarnarson in Hólar (Sk) appear as priests. Some of these men were actively involved in establishing Christian institutions (Sæmundr and Jón) and others instructed young men for the priesthood (Sæmundr and Teitr). All of them seem to have been chieftains (see ch. II 2.1, II 3.1, III 4.1) and all, except for Bishop

Jón who does not seem to have had any children, had sons who became priests and chieftains.

In *Kristni saga* there are two lists of important men in the early 12th century. One lists the 13 greatest chieftains in the country at the time of Bishop Gizurr's death in 1118¹ and the other names ten chieftains as examples of the many respectable men who were 'learned and ordained as priests, even if they were chieftains' in the time of Bishop Gizurr (1082-1118).² The latter list comes in the context of Bishop Gizurr's achievements: he had 'pacified the country so well that no major disputes broke out among chieftains and the carrying of arms all but ceased.'³ The ordained chieftains are therefore being cited as evidence for the early Christian Golden Age which 13th century scholarship had created out of Bishop Gizurr's episcopacy (see ch. III 1).

There is little doubt that all these men were ordained - nine out of ten are known as priests from other sources⁴ - and most if not all were chieftains,⁵ but it is doubtful if being ordained had already by this time become standard practice among chieftains. Only three of these priests can have been much more than middle aged in 1118,⁶ most of the rest have death dates around 1150 (see Table 10), which suggests that for the most part this list represents the generation of chieftains born in 1080-90.⁷

The other list in *Kristni saga*, the list of 13 major chieftains in 1118 supports this.⁸ Only two of these great chieftains were priests themselves but nine of them had

¹ Counting the sons of Asbjörn as one - Bsk I, 30-31

² [Þá voru flestur virðingamenn lærðir ok vígðir til presta, þó at höfðingjar væri] - Bsk I, 29

³ [fríðaði svá vel landit, at þá urðu engar stórdeilur með höfðingjum, en vápnaburðr lagðist mjök niðr] - Bsk I, 29

⁴ Sæmundr Sigfússon in ÍF I, 3, Hallr Teitsson in DI I, 185, Magnús Þórðarson in Bsk I, 76, Ari fróði in Bsk I, 145, 158, 231, Guðmundr Brandsson in Bsk I, 79, Sturl, 8, Ingimundr Einarsson in DI I, 186, Ketill Guðmundsson in DI I, 186, Ketill Þorsteinsson in Sturl, 35, Jón Þorvarðarson in DI I, 186. Símun Jörundarson is not known from any other source

⁵ It is not known if Símun Jörundarson, Guðmundr Brandsson or Jón Þorvarðarson owned *godorð* - the sons of the latter two did not, but they were nevertheless men of considerable significance

⁶ Sæmundr Sigfússon was born in 1056 (IA, 108, 318, 470) and was therefore 64 in 1118 - he may even have been ordained before Gizurr became bishop in 1082 as he is supposed to have come from abroad in 1076x8 (IA 110, 251, 471) and soon afterwards become a pastor at Oddi (Bsk I, 157, 229). Ari fróði was born in 1066x7 (IA, 18, 58, 109, 318, 471) and was therefore 51 or 2 in 1118. Ketill Þorsteinsson was more than seventy when he died in 1145 (Bsk I, 77) so he must have been around 45 in 1118. Magnús Þórðarson may also have been aged by 1118 as the author of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* makes his son Þórðr represent the family in the events of 1120 (Sturl, 29) and his grandson Páll Sölvason was already of respectable age in 1143 and 1148 (DI I, 186, Bsk I, 79)

⁷ On the life-expectancy of chieftains in Iceland see Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 I, 274-303

⁸ This list is a probably a 13th century reconstruction rather than based on any 12th century evidence - it is only just that these men were all contemporaries - one of them, Sigmundur Þorgilsson died on pilgrimage in 1118 while Þorgeirr Hallason cannot have been much more than a teenager then as he died in 1169 (IA 117 Bsk I 418). As it ends with this list *Kristni saga* has another at its beginning naming 28 major chieftains in 983 (Bsk I, 4). Such lists are a common feature and clearly underlie much 13th century historical scholarship. The author of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* has for instance had access to a similar list - he has 9 chieftains in common with *Kristni saga*'s list and adds at least two *godorðsmenn* and two lawspeakers (Þorsteinn *ranglátr* d 1149, Þórolfr Asbjarnarson and Finn Hallsson (1139-45), Guðmundr Þorgeirsson (1123-34) respectively). The use of lists like these in 13th century reconstructions of the past lacks full treatment - for an overview see Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 I, 214-62

Table 10. Ordained chieftains in the 12th century

Major chieftains in 1118	Ordained chieftains in 1080x1118	High-born priests in 1143	Descendants
Southern quarter:			
	Sæmundr Stigtússon in Oddi (R) (d. 1133)	- h.s. Eyjólfur in Oddi (d. 1158) - h.s. Loptr	h.s. Jón deacon and chieftain in Oddi (d. 1197) father of Sæmundr deacon and chieftain at Oddi (d. 1222) and Páll bishop of Skálholt 1195-1211
Hallr Fentsson in Haukadalur (Á) (d. 1150)	Hallr Fentsson	Hallr Fentsson	h.s. Gizurr deacon and chieftain and lawspeaker 1181-1202 (d. 1206) father of Hallr priest, lawspeaker 1203-1209 and abbot of Helgafell (SD) 1221-25 and Þykkvibær (VS) 1225-30, Þorvaldr priest and chieftain (d. 1235) and Magnús bishop of Skálholt (1217-37)
Skúli Egilsson		- h.s. Þórr - h.s. Einarr?	h.s. Þórvarr chieftain in Garðar (B) (d. 1187) father of Þórr priest and chieftain (d. 1220) and Guðný mother of Þórr, Sighvatr and Snorri chieftains of the Sturlungar
	Símun Jörundarson in Bær (B)		Descendants unknown, possibly father of Þórr priest killed in 1128. In 1183 and 1196 Högnr Þormóðarson 'the rich', a priest, was living at Bær, considered of poor family
	Magnús Þórðarson	h.g.s. Páll Sólvason	h.s. Magnús priest and chieftain in Reykholt (B) (d. 1223)
Western quarter:			
Styrmir Hreinsson		h.c. Ormr Kóðrásson (d. 1179)	Son of Styrmir was Abbot Hreinn of Hítardalur (B) (d. 1171). Ormr's descendants are unknown but his brother was Hermundr chieftain in Kálmannstunga (B) (d. 1197) father of Ketill priest in Skálholt and abbot of Helgafell (SD) 1217-20 and Hreinn priest
Halldórr Egilsson		h.s. Egill	h.g.s. Bersi Halldórsson priest (d. 1204) father of Teir bishop elect (d. 1214)
	Ari <i>fróði</i> (d. 1148)	h.s. Þorgils in Staðarstaður (SD) (d. 1170)	h.s. Ari chieftain in Staðarstaður (d. 1188). From him the chieftaincy passed to his son-in-law Þórr Sturluson deacon (d. 1237)
	Guðmundr Brandsson in Hjarðarholt (SD) (d. 1151)		h.s. Magnús priest in Hjarðarholt who gave the <i>staðr</i> to Sighvatr Sturluson in 1197
Þorgils Oddason in Staðarhöll (SD) (d. 1151)		h.s. Oddi in Staðarhöll (d. 1151)	Oddi's younger brother Einarr chieftain (d. 1185)
	Ingimundr Línarsson in Reykhólar (SD) (d. 1169)	Ingimundr Línarsson	Ingimundr's descendants are unknown. He gave his <i>gøðorð</i> to Þorgils Oddason
Þórr Erlsson			h.s. Sturla chieftain in Hvammur (SD) (d. 1183) father of Þórr deacon and chieftain at Staðarstaður (d. 1237) father of Guttormr deacon (d. 1255) and Ólafr subdeacon, poet and scholar at Stafholt (B) (d. 1259). None of the other chieftains of the Sturlungar were ordained although some like Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241) and Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284) were learned
Þórr Þorvaldsson in Vatnsfjörður (V)			h.s. Páll priest in Vatnsfjörður (drowned 1171) married daughter of Bishop Brandr. The chieftaincy passed to his brother Snorri (d. 1194)
Abbreviations: h.s. = his son, h.g.s. = his grand son, h.s.l. = his son-in-law, h.c. = his cousin			

Major chieftains in 1118	Ordained chieftains in 1080x1118	High-born priests in 1143	Descendants
Northern quarter:			
Haflíði Vlásson at Breiðabólstaður (H) (d. 1130)			h s J Ingimundr Illugason priest (d. 1150) father of Illugi in Breiðabólstaður
sons of Ásbjörn			None of the descendants of Ásbjörn, the Ásbirningar who ruled supreme in Skagaljarður by 1200 were ordained as far as is known
	Ketill Guðmundsson (d. 1158)	Ketill Guðmundsson	h s Jón priest and chieftain in Holt (Sk) (d. 1192) who gave his <i>gøðorð</i> to his cousin Guðmundr <i>dóttir</i>
Ketill Þorsteinsson in Moðruvellir (F.) (d. 1145)	Ketill Þorsteinsson	h s Rúnólftr (d. 1186)	Ketill was bishop of Hólar 1122-45. The son of Rúnólftr may have been Kári abbot of Þingeyrar (H) 1181-87 who was probably the father of Styrmir <i>fróði</i> scholar, lawspeaker 1210-14, 1232-35 and prior of Viðey (K) 1235-45. Ketill's nephews were Guðmundr and Rúnólftr sons of Dálkr both priests listed among the high born of 1143 in the western quarter
Þorgeirr Hallason in Hvassafell (I) (d. 1169)			h s Ingimundr priest (d. 1189) fostered h g s Guðmundr Arason bishop of Hólar 1203-37
	Jón Þorvarðarson (d. 1150)	Jón Þorvarðarson	h s (?) Ormólftr (d. 1197) father of Jón in Moðruvellir (E) (d. 1222) and Þorvarðr in Mikligarður (E) <i>storbændr</i> if not chieftains
Eastern quarter:			
Gizurr Þinarsson		h s Oddr in Valþjófsstaður (A) (d. 1180)	h s Teitr deacon and chieftain in Hof in Vopnartjóður (A) (d. 1223)
Sigmundur Þorgilsson (d. 1118)			h s Jón chieftain in Svínafell (A) and brother-in-law of bishop Björn Gilsson (d. 1164), father of Ormr chieftain who became a monk at Þverá (E) (d. 1191) and grandfather of Ormr Skeggjason abbot of Þverá c. 1191-1212. Ormr Jónsson's sons were Sigurðr chieftain at Svínafell and Moðruvellir (I) later monk at Þverá (d. 1235) and Sigmundur priest and chieftain at Svínafell (d. 1198) father of Jón chieftain at Valþjófsstaður and Svínafell (d. 1212) father of Ormr chieftain at Svínafell (d. 1241) who was the most popular of ordained chieftains and of Brandr bishop of Hólar 1263-4
Abbreviations: h s = his son, h g s = his grand son, h s l = his son-in-law			

their sons ordained as priests and the descendants or successors of two more were also priests. Of these 13 chieftains whose sons and grandsons dominated Icelandic politics in the 12th century only two had no descendants of note who became priests. The two are however important exceptions because their descendants, the Ásbirningar and the Sturlungar, became two of five families which dominated Icelandic politics in the 13th century.

It seems then that while a few powerful families had decided to have their sons ordained shortly before or around 1100 it became almost a norm among chieftains after 1100.

Of the families or kin groups which are known to have held power in the 12th century the *Haukdælir* in *Árnesþing* (Bishops Ísleifr and Gizurr, Teitr's son Ísleifr and his son Hallr) were first to become involved with the church. Next were the Oddaverjar in *Rangárþing* (Sæmundr Sigfússon) and *Reykhyllingar* in *Borgarfjorður* (Þórðr Sölvason and his son Magnús). In the last quarter of the 11th century these families were joined by the *Snæfellingar* (Ari *fróði*) in *Snæfellsnes*; the *Fljótamenn* in *Fljót* (Ketill Guðmundsson) and the *Möðruvellingar* in *Eyjafjorður* (Ketill Þorsteinsson). To this generation belongs also Vilmundur Þórólfsson the first abbot of *Þingeyrar* (1133-48); he was the son of Þórólfr Sigmundarson who was according to *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða* a senior chieftain in the north (*Húnaþing* or *Skagafjorður*) whose power and influence was fading around 1120¹

About the same time, or shortly after, these families are joined by the *Reyknesingar* (SD) (Ingimundr Einarsson and Guðmundr Brandsson²); a branch of the *Möðruvellingar* from *Þverá* (E) (Bishop Björn Gilsson d. 1162); a family from *Mikligarður* (E) (Jón Þorvarðarson (d. 1150)³) and the *Reynistaðarmenn* (Sk) (Árni Björnsson⁴). *Eyjólfr Gunnvaldsson* from *Grenjaðarstaður* (Þ) (d. 1142)⁵ probably also represents a family of power as does Finnur Hallsson priest and lawspeaker 1139 (- d. 1145) from *Hofteigur* in *Jokuldalur* (A),⁶ *Skapti Þórarinnsson* from *Mosfell* (K)⁷ and *Brandr Úlfhéðinsson* from *Víðimýri* (Sk) (d. 1159).⁸ It is also possible that *Hámundr* and *Þorbjörn* sons of *Tyrfingr* represent a family of power in *Skagafjorður* in this period.⁹ The *Staðarmenn* in *Steingrímsfjorður* (V) may have an early representative in the *Brandr Bergþórsson* who hurt his hand while preparing the coffin for *Jón Ögmundarson* in 1121¹⁰ and the *Húnaröðlingar* in *Húnaþing* are represented by *Haflíði's* nephew *Sigurðr Bergþórsson* who was killed in the battle at *Hvalir* in Norway 12 November 1139 and *Haflíði's* son-in-law *Ingimundr Illugason* at *Breiðabólstaður* (d. 1150).¹¹

¹ Sturl, 31 On Vilmundur Bsk I, 168, 241, IA, 114, 321, DI III, 28, 153, 311 On his family Sturl, 123

² ASB XI, 50, DI I, 186, Sturl, 8, Bsk I, 418 ASB XI, 50, Sturl, 8, 32, Bysp I, 105

³ ASB XI, 50, DI I, 186, IA, 114

⁴ Bysp I, 97

⁵ Bsk I, 242, IA, 114

⁶ Sturl, 25, DI I, 185, IA, 114, 321, 474

⁷ DI I, 186, IF II, 299

⁸ Sturl, 55, DI I, 186, IA, 116

⁹ IF I, 372.

¹⁰ Bsk I, 176 He may have been a grandfather of *Brandr bergþórsson*, father of *Jón* priest at *Staður* in *Reykjanes* (SD) and later *Staður* in *Steingrímsfjorður* (V) (d 1211) - Bsk I, 425, Sturl, 47, 63-64, 113-15, 179, 893-94 *Jón's* father may have been the same as *Skegg-Brandr* father of *Halldóra* (d 1190) wife of *Jon Loftsson* in *Oddi* - Sturl, 46

¹¹ ÍF XVIII, 316 ASB XI, 55, IA, 114

Much of the evidence for these early 12th century priests and their familial relations is circumstantial and uncertain and many of these families did not continue to hold power in their regions in the latter part of the 12th century. It is only with the next generation (i.e. the sons of the chieftains of 1118) that the evidence becomes fuller and it seems that towards the middle of the 12th century significant numbers, and even a majority, of chieftains and aristocratic householders were ordained. In this period it is not only the oldest sons of chieftains who become priests but there is also a clear tendency for chieftains to marry their daughters to priests and sons of priests.

An important source in this context is the list of high-born priests from 1143.¹ It has the names of forty priests, ten from each quarter. Sixteen of them are not known from other sources² but the rest were either chieftains or aristocratic householders of local importance which suggests that the same applies to those who are not known. The majority of the unknown priests are in the eastern quarter, for which there are far fewer sources than other parts of the country. As the criterion behind the list is pedigree and not political power it is of course possible that there were regional differences in the social importance of the priests. There may have been fewer chieftains among the priests of the eastern quarter than the western, for instance, reflecting either different tactics among the most powerful in the east or the possibility that the most powerful had already by this time become very few in the east. On the whole it is however likely that the list gives only the names of those who had put their high birth to good use and come to positions of influence. The fact that the list omits Ari *fróði* who had still five years to live when it was compiled, but includes his son Þorgils also suggests that it reflects the current political situation, Ari was at least 75 years old in 1143 and had probably handed the chieftaincy to his son who was probably more than middle aged by this time (d. 1170). Whatever purpose the list had, or if it was only an intellectual exercise, the men it records were men who wielded real power - whether they owned *godorð* or not - and it can confidently be taken as a confirmation of the strong indications from other sources that in the middle of the 12th century the majority of chieftains were ordained. 40 must have been a sizeable proportion of priests in Iceland in the middle of the 12th century. Bishop Páll Jónsson found that he needed 290 priests if all the churches in his diocese were to be served fully, which by implication means

¹ DI I, 185-6. On this list see Einar Arnórsson 1942: 49-51, Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 I, 214-19, Ólafía Einaradóttir 1963: 102-103, Ellehøj 1965: 58.

² Skeggi Fenkelsson, Svarthofði Arnbjarnarson, Ögmundur Þorkelsson - from Breiðabolstaður in Fljótshlíð (R)?, Brandr Þorkelsson - from Helgatell (SD)? Þorðr Þorvaldsson - usually not regarded as the same as the chieftain of that name from Vatnsljordur (Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 I, 217), Guðmundr Dalksson - usually regarded as the brother of Runólfur priest at Helgatell, nephews of Ketill Þorsteinsson bishop of Hólar (Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 I, 217), Bersi Hallvarðsson, Bjarni Konalsson, Guðmundr Knutsson - in Svarfærdalur? (Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 I, 218), Páll Bjarnason - is most probably the same as the chieftain who supported Sturla Þorðarson at the Alþing in 1159 (Sturl., 62), Helgi Starkaðarson, Hjalú Arnsteinsson, Markus Marðarson - d. 1149? (IA, 20, 60, 114), Teitr Karason, Þorvarðr Jóhannsson, Þorarin Þorvarðsson

that around 1200 some 430 priests were needed in the country as a whole. If the number of priests was slowly increasing in the latter half of the 12th century the list of high born priests therefore has more than 10% of priests in the country in 1143. It is with this 10% of the clerical population we will be concerned in the following. Information on clerics in the 12th century is almost entirely restricted to the upper echelons of society, it is only in the 13th century that we meet priests which belong to the lower strata of society. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters there is reason to believe that there were always clerics of widely varying social standing but it is maintained here that in the 12th century the priesthood was predominantly upper class.

This is suggested by the patterns of ordinations in some families in the west and north. The Staðarhólmenn, Seldælir, Vatnsfirðingar and Grundarmenn were not closely associated with the church in the 12th century but all were prominent in political conflict in their respective areas and owned *goðorð*. The principal estates of all these families were church-farms, centrally located in each area, which later at least were among the most important churches in the country.¹ For three of these families it is known, and for the Grundarmenn it is reasonably certain, that in the early or middle part of the 12th century the respective chieftains had their elder sons ordained as priests.

The chieftain Þorgils Oddason in Staðarhóll (SD) sent his older son Oddi to be educated with Sæmundr *fróði* in Oddi (R) whence he came a priest and was considered to have become learned. He died in the same epidemic as his father in 1151.² Markús, the elder son of the Seldælir's chieftain Sveinbjörn Bárðarson in Eyri in Arnarfjörður (V) was put to study in childhood and became a priest but was mainly remembered for his superhuman strength. He died in an avalanche, leaving the task of heading the family to his younger brother Hrafn (d 1213), who was not even a *hostiarius*.³ The Seldælir's main rivals for power in Vestfirðir were the Vatnsfirðingar. Þórðr Þorvaldsson who established the *staðr* in Vatnsfjörður (V) had his older son Páll ordained as priest, but after Páll had shown himself to be a promising bully - by fighting in the Law court at the Alþing and abducting women - he drowned in 1171 and his brother Snorm inherited the family *goðorð*.⁴

The chieftain Þorsteinn *ranglátr* at Grund in Eyjafjörður (E) (d. 1149) had many children through whom he made marriage alliances with a number of important families. His son, the priest Ketill, succeeded him at Grund but he does not seem to

¹ None of these were a *staðr*, but all owned other lands and had more than one priest attached - DI II, 452-53, DI III, 79-80, 198 (DI IV, 146-46), DI IV, 133-35

² Sturl, 51-52, 53-56, DI I, 186

³ *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarmarsonar hin sérstaka* asserts that Hrafn was 'well educated, but not ordained more than *krunuvígsla*' (= *prima tonsura*) - [vel lærður, og ei meir vígður en krunuvígslu] - Sturl, 884. The *prima tonsura* 'marked admission to the clerical state before further progress through the seven orders. It imposed an obligation to read the canonical hours. . . keep a decent hair style and wear sober clothes' - Guðrún P. Helgadóttir ed 1987 60 n 2/29-30. As in Messk, 108, *Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche* 10, 250-51

⁴ Sturl, 50, 88, 89-90, 106, 108, IA, 117

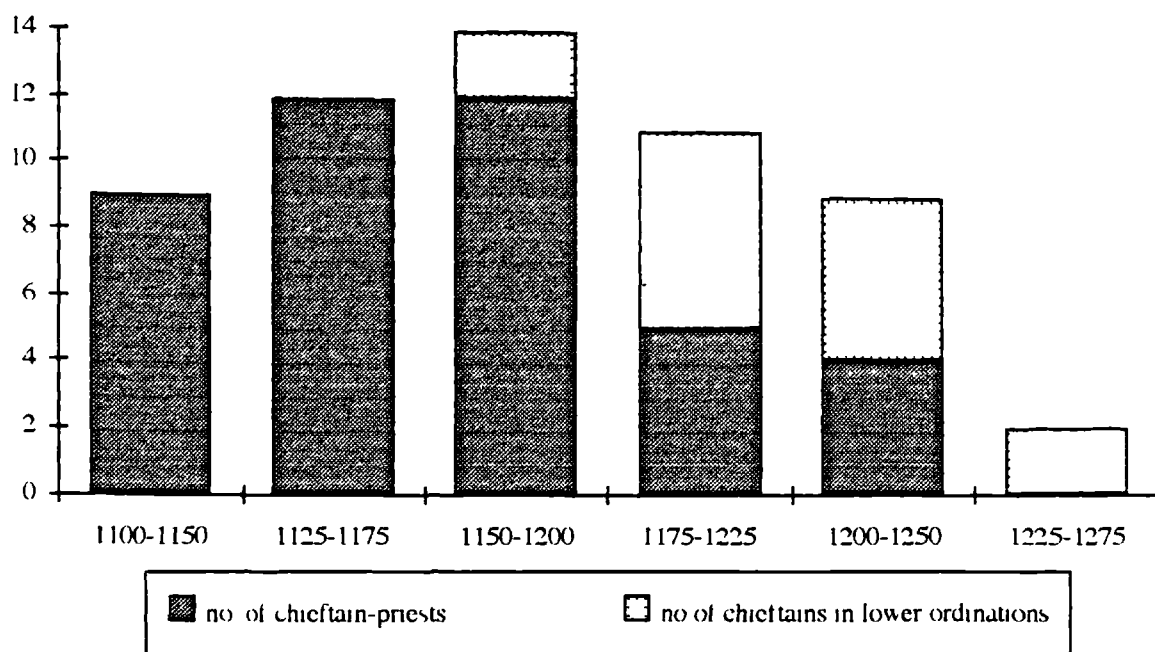


Figure 1 The numbers of ordained chieftains by period Based on Table 11

have been old when he died in 1173 because his son Þorlákr died as late as 1240 and Ketill's brother Ólafr who seems to have inherited the family *godðorð* died in 1204. The reason why Ketill seems to have been older than Ólafr is that it was he who inherited Grund from his father and his son Þorlákr seems to have lived there until 1199 when he was exiled from Eyjafjörður Ólafr, who lived at Saurbær (E), had the family's *godðorð* in 1187 and it may be that he did because Þorlákr was still only a teenager¹

In addition to these cases, there are numerous others where the relative age of chieftains' sons cannot be ascertained but where sons who were clearly intended to wield power were ordained, Sigmundur Ormsson of the Svínfellingar in Svínafell (A) (d. 1198),² Kleppjárn Klængsson of the Hrafnvílingar in Hrafnagil (E) (d. 1194),³ Jón Ketilsson of the Fljótamenn in Holt (Sk) (d. 1192);⁴ Halldórr Snorrason of the Melmenn (d. 1163),⁵ Bersi Halldórrsson of the Mýramenn (d. 1204)⁶ and Bjarni Bjarnason of the Vallverjar (d. 1181)⁷ are the most conspicuous examples in the generation after the priests on the list from 1143

In most of these cases the families in question had not had other brothers ordained and in many of them there were no priests in the subsequent generations. As

¹ Sturl. 50, 108 IA, 61 Sturl. 109 124 126, IA, 122

² Sturl. 48-49 IA, 121 324, Bsk I 437, 455

³ Sturl. 125, 126, 128 138 Bsk I, 445

⁴ Sturl. 129-30, Bsk I 439 IA, 22, 61, 120, 180, 324

⁵ Sturl. 103, IA, 116

⁶ Sturl. 193 Bsk I, 489 IA 62 112

⁷ Sturl. 184 IF I 291-93 363-65, IA 118

Table 11. Ordained chieftains in Iceland 1100-1275

region	1100-1150	1125-1175	1150-1200	1175-1225	1200-1250	1225-1275
	Priests					
R	Ejolftr Sémundarson	Lopttr Sémundarson	Teitr Hauksson Bjarni Bjarnason	Þorvaldr Gizurarson Magnús Gizurarson	Vilhjálm Sémundarson Magnús Hallsson	
A	Halli Teitsson			Magnús Pálsson Þorðr Bógvarsson		
K	Skapti Þórarinnsson					
B	Simun Þórundarson	Páll Sglvason Þorðr Skuláson Ömir Kæðranson	Búi Viðmundarson			
SD	Guðmundr Brandsson Ingimundr Einarrson Áli Þorgrísson	Öddi Þorgrísson Brandr Þorkelsson Þorgrí Arason Rúnólftr Dálksson	Þorgrí Snorrason			
V			Markus Sveinbjarnarson Jon Brandsson Páll Þórðarson Halldórr Snorrason Jón Ketilsson		Jón Markússon	
H						
SK	Ketill Guðmundsson	Brandr Úlfhéðinsson Þorgeir Guðmundarson Rúnólftr Ketilsson				
E	Jon Þorvaldsson		Ketill Þorsteinsson Kleppján Kleingsson			
P						
A		Öddr Gizurarson	Sigmundur Örnsson	Eyjólftr Hallsson		
	Lower ordinations					
			Jon Loptsson (R) Gizurr Hallsson (Á)	Sémundur Jónsson (R) Örnir Jónsson (R) Páll Jónsson (R) Þorðr Sturluson (SD) Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (V) Teitr Óðússon (A)	Páll Sémundarson (R) Jón Örnsson (R) Kleingr Þorvaldsson (Á) Kalltr Guðtorinnsson (E) Örnir Jónsson (A)	Egil Solmundarson (B) Guttormr Kállsson (SK)

is clear from Figure III 5.1 there was a sharp drop in the number of chieftain-priests around and after 1200 and chieftains begin to let it suffice to be deacons or some other lesser ordination. It is notable that the families which had first become associated with the church, the Oddaverjar, Haukdælir and the Reykhyltingar were also those which kept the association longest. In these cases it had probably become a matter of family tradition by the beginning of the 13th century and it is unlikely that the likes of Þorvaldr Gízurarson were actively involved in the cure of souls.

In the latter half of the 12th century when many chieftains were priests but had on the whole ceased to have their eldest sons or likely heirs ordained, several developments can be discerned.

- From the late 12th century onwards younger brothers and sons of sisters in powerful families begin to be ordained in significant numbers. Examples Ólafr Þorvarðsson, Hallbjörn Jónsson, Vilhjálmr Sæmundarson (d. 1273) and his nephew Ísarr Pálsson of the Oddaverjar;¹ Teitr Þorvaldsson of the Haukdælir (d. 1259);² Jón *krókr* Þorleifsson of the Sturlungar (d. 1229);³ Abbot Þorsteinn Tumason of the Ásbirningar;⁴ Þórðr son of Önundr Þorkelsson,⁵ Ingimundur Þorgeirsson and his nephew Guðmundr Arason and Abbot Arnórr Helgason of the Kirkbæingar.⁶

- Some families which were beginning to lose out in the race for power begin to concentrate on involvement with the church. This applies to some extent to the Reykhyltingar⁷ but more conspicuously to the Hítðælir;⁸ Skarðverjar.⁹

¹ Sturl, 46 Sturl, 212-13, 787, IA, 139, 331, Sturl, 428, 537

² Sturl, 193, 401, 455, 475, IA, 134, 192, 330

³ Sturl, 325, IA, 128

⁴ Sturl, 48, 114, Bsk I, 366, IA, 64

⁵ Sturl, 156

⁶ Sturl, 550, DI I, 395, IA, 65, 131, 132 190, 329, 482

⁷ With the priest Þáll Sólvason (d. 1185) being the last powerful chieftain of the family His son the priest Magnús (d. 1221) gave up Reykholt (B) to Snorm Sturluson on condition that he made men out of Magnús's sons, the priests Arn and Brandr - Sturl, 211

⁸ The son of Þorlákr Ketilsson in Hítardalur (d. 1240) was the priest and law speaker Ketill (d. 1273)

⁹ Þorgils the priest in Skarð (SD) (d. 1201) gave his part of the family *gøðord* to Þorðr Sturluson in 1198 - Sturl, 187 His son Haukr the priest (d. 1245) moved to Hagí in Barðastrond (V) where he married a daughter of the priest and local leader Steinólfur Ljótsson - Sturl, 240 (923) Þorgils's brother was the priest Nartí (d. 1202) and it was his son the priest Snorm who became the leader of the family Snorm's son was the priest Nartí (d. 1284) who married a daughter of the priest Ketill of the Hítðælir and lived at Kolbeinsstaðir (B) Through his son Snorm the lawman (d. 1332) at Skarð the Skarðverjar family was continued The Skarðverjar were close allies of the Sturlungar in the 13th century and were among the few families in the century which retained their family estate and continued to wield influence in the late middle ages

Staðarhólmenn;¹ Seldælir in Selárdalur² and Ámundaætt.³ In the cases of the Skarðverjar and Reykhyllingar the leaders of both families had been priests for more than two generations around 1200 but in others families entering the priesthood was a 13th century reaction to relative deterioration of these families' political authority.

- In the late 12th century there begin to crop up examples of very rich men of non-aristocratic family who were ordained as priests and were attempting to better their social positions through marriage alliances. The best examples are Hogni Þormóðarson in Bær (B) and Þórir Þorsteinsson in Deildartunga (B). Bersi Vermundarson in Borg (B) may be another.

- In the early 13th century members of successful families tended to hold lower ordinations. This is particularly true of the Oddaverjar where it can be put down to family tradition but in other families, which had had very little involvement with the church, it also becomes common and may have been regarded as a sign of refinement. Examples: Þórðr Sturluson and some of his sons of the Sturlungar; Snorri Markússon from Melar (B); Oddr Sveinbjarnarson from Álftanes (B); Snorri Grímsson from Hof in Hofðastrand (Sk), Kálfr Guttormsson and his son Guttormr and Teitr Oddsson in Hof in Vopnafjörður (A).⁴

It seems then that from the late 12th century the aristocracy began to distance itself from active involvement in pastoral duties. We do not of course know whether the likes of Sæmundr *fróði* or his pupil Oddi Þorgilsson actually had ministered to a flock and had sung masses regularly or if they had some completely different sense of what their pastoral duties involved. In this context it does not matter much; it is clear that in the early and mid-12th century aristocrats attached significance to being

¹ With the death of Einarr Þorgilsson in 1185 the chieftaincy of the Staðarhólmenn came to an end. Einarr's nephews, the priests Hallr (d. 1228) and Þorgils in Staðr in Reykjanes (SD), represent the next generation of the family. Hallr's son the priest Páll, who married a daughter of the priest Sámur Símunarson in Narfeyri (SD), was a local leader and ally of the Sturlungar. The son of Þorgils was the priest and abbot, Lambkár (d. 1249) who was a career cleric in the first half of the 13th century. His grandsons were the priests Aðalbrandr (d. 1286) and Þorvaldr (d. 1289) who figure in *Árna saga biskups* as a new breed of church dignitaries which was appearing on the late 13th century. Þorvaldr was one of the first rural deans in Iceland.

² The Seldælir failed in their bid for supremacy in the Vestfirðir in the beginning of the 13th century, and the descendants of the chieftain, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (d. 1211), did not wield local power. The gap left by Hrafn was filled by a side-branch of the family, the sons of his cousin Ragnheiður Aronsdóttir, two of which - Eyvindr in Hagi (V) and Tómas in Selárdalur (V) (d. 1253), were priests. Their sister was married to the priest Skúli Þorsteinsson in Staðarhraun (B). Eyvindr and Tómas were local leaders in the southern Vestfirðir in the middle of the 13th century and it was Tómas's descendants who headed the family in the late middle ages.

³ The chieftain Guðmundr *gríss* in Þingvellir (Á) (d. 1210) married his daughters to chieftains of the Svinfellingar and Haukdælir but these powerful in-laws do not seem to have been much help to the elder son, the priest Magnús (d. 1240). His temporal powers in Kjalarnes seem to have been waning in the 1210s when Snorri Sturluson made concerted efforts to undermine him. He was later selected to become bishop of Skálholt but was rejected by the archbishop. Magnús's younger brother Þorlák lived most of his life in the east among the Svinfellingar (apparently his wife's kin) and two of their sons became priests - the other was Bishop Arni (d. 1298). Among his nephews and nieces was one bishop, one abbot and three priests.

⁴ See Table III 5 1

ordained and we can with confidence assert that this also meant that they found it expedient to be, or be seen, as patrons of the church. As the aristocrats were followed into the priesthood by more modest householders, the exclusivity of the office diminished and the aristocrats began to distance themselves from pastoral duties (however they had been perceived). This may have coincided with increased episcopal supervision of the cure of souls in each area, which may have resulted in more onerous duties for the pastors and which consequently may have become less appealing for people who considered themselves to be of high rank. More clearly however the decrease in the number of ordained chieftains coincides with the increased consolidation of power which is evident from the late 12th century. This suggests that the pastoral office had aided a few generations of chieftains in developing the means of wielding institutionalised power (see ch. I 2) but that once these means had become fairly secure in their hands they were able to stop being priests

It is probably not a coincidence that the four examples, which were enumerated above, of older sons being ordained in aristocratic families, all come from areas where power consolidation took place relatively late or took longer to accomplish. It suggests that in this these chieftains were imitating their more successful peers in the southern flatlands whose success was, or at least appeared to be, inextricably linked with their intimate involvement with the church

Towards the end of the 12th century the social make-up of the clergy looks much more complex than it did in the beginning of that century. There are still a few chieftain priests, but many are householders of more modest, although it seems in most cases respectable, rank. The institutional expansion of the church, with the monastic foundations of the mid and late 12th century and the growing administration around the bishops, was giving disinherited aristocrats a chance of saving themselves from obscurity as well as creating opportunities for promising young men of lower status to better their position. In addition there have appeared a number of priests who were in service for the owners of churches and do not always seem to have been of very respectable parentage

This picture is of course to a large extent conditioned by the nature of our sources. Detailed narrative accounts from which distinctions of social class and political influence can be gleaned are only available for the last three or four decades of the 12th century. For the early 12th century on the other hand the evidence is much more sparse and incomplete, it is mostly evidence written in the succeeding century and deals, as can be expected, almost exclusively with people occupying the highest rung in society's ladder. It is therefore perfectly possible that we are deceived by our sources and that the social makeup of the clergy was quite complex as early as the 11th century. It is however no good to shelter behind the silence of the sources and further below it

will be argued that while there probably always was an underclass of priests it did not become socially significant until the latter half of the 12th century.

It has been argued above that owning churches and being priests had helped chieftains around and after 1100 overcome problems of consolidating and perpetuating power. It has also been shown how as these chieftain families developed overlordships, others bowed out of that race in the late 12th and early 13th century and concentrated instead on strengthening their local powers by being their subordinates' spiritual as well as political leaders. When it suited them these local magnates could use their ecclesiastical identities as an excuse not to take sides in political conflict and this had become, by the middle of the 13th century, a valuable asset. This no doubt contributed a great deal to an increasingly separate identity of the priesthood (discussed further below), and in general to the growth of a new set of social distinctions, where the powers of a magnate, his behaviour and interests, became defined by the office he held.

In this we can see how the church contributed to increasingly complex and compartmentalised power structures; it helped to create conditions with different tiers of magnates and helped them to define their roles in respect of each other. These issues will be discussed in more detail in ch. IV

III 5.3 *The status of priests according to the Old Christian Law section*

As discussed in ch. I 3.5 the Old Christian law section was first drafted in 1122x33 but the version surviving in *Konungsbók* (the slightly older of the two main manuscripts of *Grágás*) was probably arranged between 1199 and 1216, in any case not earlier. There is no knowing how much or what parts exactly of the surviving version originate in the earliest version, and it is therefore safest to regard the text as relevant to conditions around 1200.

Most history books that mention the Icelandic church in the Commonwealth period will stress two apparently contradictory indications about the status of the Icelandic priesthood. On the one hand reference is often made to the servile priests and on the other attention is drawn to the high status of priests, that priests owned churches and as often as not were chieftains as well. As discussed above there is no evidence for the existence of servile priests and while householding priests certainly are a conspicuous and important feature of ecclesiastical organisation in Iceland in the 12th century and remained a strong influence throughout the 13th century, their class was in the course of the latter century beginning to be outnumbered by priests who did not own the church which they served and were not heads of the households they belonged to.

These latter are the *þingaprestar* or district priests who sold their services on the open market, and it is to this type of priest that the Old Christian law section devotes most space. The regulations concerning the district priest place him in the social group of skilled servants who were free to choose their employers but had to have a fixed abode come spring every year and were closely regulated as to the work they had to carry out and what pay they could demand.¹ The difference between them and ordinary servants was that they did not take orders for their daily routine and were paid in proportion to their service or manufacture. That is shipbuilders were paid for the ship they built and priests for the mass they sung, while servants were paid fixed wages for specific periods. This type of priest is well attested in both *Sturlunga saga* and the sagas of bishops, and we may assume that the majority of priests in 12th and 13th century Iceland belonged to this category; although we do have more examples of priests who were householders or chieftains (118 against 59), that is natural considering the nature of our sources.

A district priest had to have a legal abode,² but it does not seem to be required that he lived at a church-farm, although it seems to be regarded as the norm.³ He might have had to serve more than one church,⁴ but there are contradicting indications as to whether such a priest was hired by a single church owner or several church owners collectively.⁵ The priest's duties to his flock are not regulated; the only requirement which is clearly spelled out is that the priest was always to be available to perform baptism, and could not leave his abode without the necessary implements to perform the rite.⁶ Priests seem also to have been obliged to perform funerals and bless bones that had been transferred between cemeteries,⁷ but penalties are not mentioned in case of non-compliance as they are if a priest refused to baptise or was not available to do so. Priests were paid a separate, fixed fee for performing funerals, and in a case where the deceased was impoverished it is regulated that the funeral fee should be paid rather than the burial fee to the church owner. This suggests that the funeral service was considered to be essential, if not mandatory, and that priests had a duty to perform it if asked to, although the law only mentions the limitations to a priest's claim to corpses from his ministry.⁸ Hearing last confession is referred to but not as a duty,⁹ and only

¹ Grg Ia, 2018-2210, 13215-24, Grg Ib, 21010-25, 2172 16, Grg II, 245-2619, 5214-5311, 588-16, 604-7, cf Grg Ia, 13021-26. Þorkell Jóhannesson 1933 83-92, 106-20

² Grg Ia, 412-19, 1617-20, 2018-27, 13215-24, Grg Ib, 2175-16, Grg II, 348, 2698-16

³ Grg Ia 819-20, 169-11, Grg II, 721-81

⁴ Grg Ia, 1620-23, 219 11, Grg II, 1924-25

⁵ Grg Ia, 1617 172, 2024-27, 13216-19 vs Grg Ib 2172 3, 9-16

⁶ Grg Ia, 411-54, Grg II, 217-312, 72 3

⁷ Grg Ia, 107 16, 1312-13

⁸ Grg Ia, 97-24, 107-16

⁹ Grg Ia, 128-13

oblique mention is made of visiting the sick.¹ The Old Christian law section was of course a law of the land, regulating how laymen should conduct themselves as Christians and their relationship with priests and churches; it is not to be expected that it contains a manual of pastoral care. We can only assume that in Iceland the basic duties of a priest towards his flock were the same as elsewhere in medieval Christian Europe..

According to an additional clause in the *Staðarhólsbók* version of the section church owners were obliged to pay for a minimum amount of services annually,² but the Tithe law seems to indicate that the church owner should only buy so much service as the income from his tithe allowed him.³ The maximum of a priest's total annual income is regulated,⁴ and one late manuscript gives the maximum annual fee for full service at a single church.⁵ Another late manuscript also has a formula for the price of masses which were sung at other times than legally prescribed holy days.⁶ Priests were not to sing more than two masses daily, and were forbidden to sing nocturnal masses except on Christmas morning.⁷ The main worry of the legislators seems to have been that priests might sing masses ceaselessly and exact payments for all of them.⁸

District priests had some say in the management of the church they served. The church owner and priest were to decide together where graves should be taken in the cemetery. If the church owner did not do so the priest was allowed to bring fire into his church, light candles and ring the bells or could appoint someone to do it for him. This meant that if the church was damaged by fire or a bell was broken the priest was not held responsible provided that a verdict, that he had treated his church as if it were his own property and had meant to take good care of it, was proclaimed. Also if the church owner did not bring a suit in case of non-payment of the church's and priest's quarters of the tithe, the priest was allowed to do so.⁹ This suggests that by 1200 at least district priests, even if they only were attached to a church for a year, were considered to be more than just hired hands to perform certain services. Their spiritual position gave them a limited right to intervene in matters which were normally a function of ownership. Extremely limited as this right was, it is nevertheless significant and signals

¹ 'If a district is especially difficult to travel through or to reach, then the bishop has the right if he wishes to increase a priest's takings,' transl. LEI I, 37, [Par er land er sva illt yfir farar eða til farar oc a byskvp at avka le tokv prest/ ef hann vill] - Grg 1a, 21. This can refer both to visiting the sick or going to annex-churches to give services

² Grg II, 1922-26. On this clause see further in ch. III 3 3

³ [Hann skal cavpa at preste tífir sva sem hann ma við comaz] - Grg 1b, 210

⁴ Grg 1a, 2027-219, Grg 1b, 2173-9. 12 marks

⁵ Grg III, 2413-15. 4 marks

⁶ Grg III, 31811-12. 0,3 ells per mass

⁷ Grg 1a, 2111-15. St Þorlákr's Penitential also has a prohibition against saying more than two masses daily - DI I, 244

⁸ Cf. the rather paranoid regulations on foreign priests - Grg 1a, 2130-2220.

⁹ Grg 1a, 819-20, 169-15, Grg 1b, 21021-23.

changing perceptions of the reasons behind a person's rights and responsibilities, it was beginning to be possible for a man to act in the capacity of an office.

The bishops decided which priests were allowed to sing mass, and could forbid priests from officiating. Detailed regulations follow on the rights of Icelandic priests who had been abroad and of foreign priests to officiate in Iceland.¹ Intended to strengthen diocesan authority, these regulations also indicate that the bond between priest and bishop was thought of in similar terms as the bond between chieftain and householder, it was personal, and a bishop's commitments were not binding on his successor.² A priest who had had a previous bishop's permission to officiate, but had gone abroad had to get permission anew when he got back, while foreign priests had to have

the writ and seal of the bishop, and the testimony of two men who were present at their ordination and who repeat the bishop's words saying that it is lawful for people to receive all priestly offices from them.³

This refers to the writ, seal and words of the foreign bishop who ordained the priest and represents somewhat tighter regulations than given in *Staðarhólsbók*, where the priest only had to produce the two witnesses if he did not have the seal. In *Staðarhólsbók* it is also added that the bishop must provide his priests with chrism and consecrate their vestments, but if they want to have wine or flour for the bread of the Eucharist they must pay him 3 ells annually.⁴ If, as seems likely, the bishops governed the distribution of chrism, wine and flour, that of course was a tangible way of refusing priests the means of officiating.⁵

The regulations on priests' obedience to the bishop were presumably meant to apply to all priests:

Priests must be obedient to their bishop and show him their books and vestments. A priest must not wear fashions forbidden by the bishop, and must have his moustache and beard cut off and be tonsured once a month, and obey the bishop in all things.⁶

This clause on obedience is based on a Norwegian model.⁷ It is not the impression given by the saga literature that modesty of attire was an acceptable form of social

¹ Grg Ia, 2130-2210

² Cf. a bishop's right to change the size of tithe areas - Grg Ib 21411-20, Grg III, 148-14

³ Transl. LEI I 38, [rit ok innsigli byskvps oc vitni þj manna þeirra er hia voro vígsly hans oc segia orð byskvps þav at rett se mavnyvm at þigia alla þionostv at honum] - Grg Ia, 22, cf. Grg II, 2616-19

⁴ Grg II, 2614. Also in *Skálholtsbók* - Grg III, 234-7. DI II, 518-19, 545, 557, DI II 792, 800, 805, 814, 816

⁵ St Þorlák's Penitential requires that a priest does not say mass without 'wine and water, the host' [vijn ok vatn, oblati] - DI I, 243

⁶ Transl. LEI I 37, [Prestar eigr at vera hlypnir byskvpi oc syna honvm bokr sínar oc messv lot. Prestar scolo eigi fara með svndr gerþir þer er byskop bannar oc lata af havgva kampa sína oc skeg oc lata gera krönnv sína vm sinn a manapi oc hlypa byskvpi at ollv] - Grg Ia, 21

⁷ NgL I 31013

differentiation for Icelandic aristocrats, whether secular or ordained.¹ Tonsure on the other hand may well have been; from 1234 we have the homely scene where the chieftain Kálfr Guttormsson who was an acolyte and his son Guttormr who was a deacon have just been shaved and tonsured when their enemies fall upon them.² If chieftains in lower orders bothered to be shaved and tonsured regularly, that indicates that they considered these symbols of their piety or religious obligations to be important, but it is doubtful if they could afford not to dress ostentatiously.

If a priest disobeyed the bishop he could be fined 3 marks. The bishop was to bring the suit at a special court of priests at the Alþing. He was to nominate 12 priests to sit as judges in the court and the case was to be prosecuted without oaths. The bishop formed a panel of three with two priests to give verdicts as a means of proof before the court.³ The court of priests seems to some extent to have been based on the model of a panel of twelve (*tólfarkviðr* or *tylptarkviðr*), an institution a chieftain could be called upon to form at any assembly, consisting of himself and 11 others from his *vorþing* region. It was a means of establishing proof, mainly used in cases involving a greater degree of public interest instead of a panel of neighbours (*búakviðr*) or a panel of five (*bjargkviðr*), and the verdict was decided by a simple majority. The verdict of such a panel could then be used as a means of proof in any court of law.⁴ The difference between a panel of twelve and a court of priests was that in the latter the verdict of guilty carried with it an automatic sentence; a fixed fine of 3 marks payable to the bishop. In case the guilty priest did not pay his fine, he was to be prosecuted for a breach of judgement like anyone else in a secular court. It is not entirely clear how the court of priests functioned but it seems that the bishop himself was not among the 12 judges, but acted as plaintiff and produced the evidence from himself and two priests.

In *Staðurhólsbók* it is added that if 'a priest discloses anyone's confession without what his diocesan thinks legitimate excuse, the penalty is lesser outlawry. Nine of the priest's neighbours are to be called at the assembly.'⁵ Lesser outlawry involved confiscation of property and a 3 year stay abroad⁶ This is the same penalty and

¹ Björn Þorsteinsson 1963 472

² Sturl. 356 Kálfr did not own a *godord*, but was a *stórbóndi*. It is implied that Kálfr had a hunch that their days were numbered, and the tonsure may therefore be seen as having formed a part of their preparations for execution

³ Grg Ia, 212₁₋₃₀. In *Staðurhólsbók* it is added that the court of priests was to be held in the church at Þingvellir - Grg II, 25₁₈

⁴ Grg Ia, 22₂₅₋₂₃₁, 51_{2 15}, 65_{11 15}, 65₃₂₋₆₇₂₈, 123₅₋₈, 143_{11 17}, 157_{17 27}, Grg III, s.v. *kviðr*, LEI I, 253-54

⁵ Transl. LEI I, 200. [prestr rýfr script a manne sva at byscopi þeim þyckir nauðsynia lavst er sa prestr er þa undir oc varðar þat þiior þavgs garð skal quæðia til ix heimilis þva hans a þingi] - Grg II, 25 Also in *Skálhólsbók* and AM 181 4to - Grg III, 24₁₆₋₁₉, 328₂

⁶ Grg III, 608-609

procedure as described if a priest refused to baptise a child,¹ but in cases when a priest did not take a legal abode, refused to give services or charged more than the legally prescribed maximum for his services there was a three mark fine.² In all these cases the suit was to be brought in secular courts as far as can be seen.³

The Old Christian law section is primarily a manual for laymen on how to practise Christianity. It is devoted largely to practical problems like taking children to be baptised, corpses to be buried and what tasks could be performed in times of fasting. It regulates the rights and obligations of church owners, but regarding priests and bishops it only contains rules which had a bearing on their relationship with laymen. The only exception is the clause on priests' obedience to their bishop and on the court of priests.⁴ It is not unthinkable that in the 12th century the church had some internal regulations like the episcopal statutes preserved from the 13th century onwards, although there is nothing to suggest it had. What it did have was a penitential from St Þorlákr's episcopacy (1178-93) where penances are prescribed both for secular sinners and priests who were negligent in their office.⁵

Regarding priests the Old Christian law section is best seen as an attempt to reconcile the hierarchical ideology of the church on the one hand and Icelandic social conditions on the other. In part priests are seen as subordinate to their bishop, receiving from him the means of their office, but mostly the interest lies in regulating them as free agents who performed specific services. There were no formal channels available to a layman who felt injured by a priest to complain to the bishop; he could only bring a civil law suit and hope that the bishop did not throw his weight behind the priest. The bishop was supposed to be able to make his priests obey him, but there is no sense that he was responsible for them. This relationship is very much akin to the *goði-þingmaðr* relationship. It was not enshrined in law but if a *goði* could not make his *þingmenn* obey him, he lost grounds for his power, and although, for the same reason, he had better stand by them, he was not obliged to do so. That the relationship between priest and bishop was, in the minds of the legislators at least, perceived of in similar terms as the relationship between *goði* and *þingmaðr* is further suggested by the apparently personal nature of ordination and the similarity between the court of priests and the panel of twelve.

¹ Grg Ia, 41+16

² Grg Ia, 20+23, 27, 21, 9, Grg II, 19+26

³ Grg Ia, 36+16-23

⁴ Grg Ia, 21+15-30

⁵ DI I 240-44. Transl. in McNeill & Gamer 1938 355-58. Further in Sveinbjorn Ratnsson 1982a 1982b, 1985a

As is indicated towards the end of the Old Christian law section it was the bishops who made the first draft of it,¹ and although it presumably had to be accepted, and was subject to alteration, by the Law council it is likely that subsequent changes were primarily initiated by the bishops. If it was they who saw themselves as chieftains and their priests as followers (*þingmannalið*), that does have implications for our view of the nature of the early Icelandic church (see further in ch. III 4.2.).

It is not surprising that there is no mention of priests owning churches or being householders or chieftains in the Old Christian law section; it is difficult to see what problems might arise from such a union which had to be regulated by law, that is, as long as private ownership of churches was not considered problematic. What is surprising is that there is very little sense of priests having a special status, rights or privileges that had to be protected. As mentioned above priests were considered to have a limited say in the running of the churches they served, and although significant for the definition of church property, this say was more a recognition of the priests' profession and a fallback in case the guardian of the church failed to do his duty. The concern of the legislators was not to establish the authority or rights of priests, but to protect laymen from them; the main worry being that priests might force church-owners to pay for an inordinate number of masses. The type of priest the legislators are primarily concerned with, is the district priest and it is likely that the regulations reflect the unease of a farming society towards classes of people who were free to choose their employment and could demand high wages for their services. But these regulations also suggest that the district priests (not to speak of the servile priests, if they existed) were not the sort of men the bishops identified with. The company the bishops kept was that of ordained householders and chieftains, and the rights of such men were defined not by their ordination, but in secular terms of pedigree, wealth and political influence. They did not need protection or special privileges on account of their ordination. This is reflected in the reception of the idea of *privilegium canonis* in Iceland. The privilege is mentioned in the earliest preserved archiepiscopal letter to Iceland from 1174,² and consistently in such letters after that.³ In St Þorlákr's Penitential however the maiming of priests is mentioned almost in passing, among the maltreatment of all kinds of people punishable only by penance at the bishop's discretion.⁴ The impression that maiming or killing priests was not considered to be the worst problem is given by the series of archiepiscopal letters sent to Iceland between

¹ Grg Ia, 3623-26

² DI I 222

³ Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1982 38-45

⁴ DI I, 243 Killing of priests is not mentioned here, and Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1982 40 interprets that as an indication that it was considered to result in excommunication. Her interpretation that similar lenience is attested in a Norwegian synodal decree from 1189x90 - DI I, 233 is not acceptable as there a reference is being made to mitigating circumstances cf. DI II, 214, NgL V, 267 9

1174 and 1190. In these the archbishops seem much more worried that priests carried weapons, maimed and killed laymen, took part in secular politics and held secular offices.¹

The reforming Archbishops Eysteinn Erlendsson (1161-88) and Eiríkr Ívarsson (1188-1205) were concerned with establishing the church as an institution, and that could only be done by differentiating clearly between the secular and ecclesiastical spheres. That this was an uphill struggle not only in Norway, but also in Iceland is clearly reflected in the tone of their letters, and by the fact that they did not have an advocate in Iceland until Bishop Guðmundr Arason (1203-37) came to the see of Hólar.² The resistance he met, and failure on all counts, demonstrates that the Icelandic clergy was still not prepared to shed their secular identity.

It seems then that throughout the 12th century and well into the 13th, Icelandic clergy were basically secular in their outlook. This suggests that the prevalence of chieftains and householders among priests indicated by our sources gives a more or less correct picture of this class. If the vast majority of priests had been men of low birth and little economic or political significance it is likely that their influence would have been felt sooner and that there would have been significant numbers to flock to Bishop Guðmundr *góði's* side. As it was, in 1210-11 when Bishop Guðmundr had placed his see under interdict 'priests did as they wanted in their services whatever the bishop said.'³

III 5.4 Priesthood and social mobility

In the above we have almost exclusively been preoccupied with ordained chieftains and aristocratic householders. It is that sort of person who is most conspicuous in the sources for the earlier periods, it was they who were endowing churches in the 12th century and it is easy to understand how they could benefit politically from being priests.

¹ DI I, 222, 263, 288-89, 291

² St Þorlákur can hardly be counted as such, as he, no doubt wisely, concentrated his efforts on sexual reform - see ch III 4.3

³ [Prestar fara sínu fram um þjónustugerð sína hvað sem biskup sagði] - Sturl, 225. Cf. a clause earlier in the text which must be written by someone else: 'The Church there was then a poor and unhappy sight to behold. Some priests ceased singing masses because of fear of God, some continued because of fear of magnates, some because of their own will. The head-church, the mother, was sad and miserable and some of her daughters with her but some were in tears because of her sorrow. Each lived as he pleased but no-one dared to reprimand or tell the truth.' [Aumleg og hormuleg kristni var þar þá að sjá. Sumir prestar lögðu messusöng fyrir hræðslu sakir við guð, sumir fremdu fyrir hræðslu við höfðingja, sumir af sínum sjálfvilja. Hofuðkirkjan, móðirinn sat í sorg og sít og sumar dæturnar með henni en sumar glúpnuðu yfir hennar harmi. Litði hver sem lysti en engi þorði um að vanda né satt að mæla.] - Sturl, 224

It has been suggested that the sources do give a correct picture and that there were only very few Icelandic priests in the late 11th century, and that those were of aristocratic birth. The number of ordained chieftains increased until the middle of the 12th century but then dropped and we begin to find different kinds of people as priests. This is no doubt a simplification but, it is hoped, a useful one, especially regarding the long-term influence of the church on the structure of Icelandic society.

There probably were from an early date Icelandic priests who were not householders as well as householding priests who were not aristocratic. It may be for instance that the priest Þorkell who was householder in Hvammur (SD) in the early 12th century was not aristocratic. His lineage was probably unknown to the author of *Sturlu saga* as not even his patronymic is given, but he is called *góðr bóndi* (lit. 'householder of standing' = *bonus vir?*) which is not used of just anybody and the full name of his wife is given which may suggest that the author intended the reader to recognise her. Þorkell had two sons one of whom was also a priest, but although they were promising men they lost control over their finances after their father's death and sold the estate to Þoðvarr Barkarson.¹

The evidence for Þorkell's social status is ambiguous as is that of the priest Erlendr Hallason who was householder in neighbouring Ásgarður in c. 1160. Erlendr was a *þingmaðr* of Einarr Þorgilsson and is called *gildr bóndi* (lit. 'worthy householder'). Erlendr was not a chieftain but he was clearly a prominent householder in his area since he often gave hospitality to his chieftain Einarr and initiated a quarrel with Einarr's chief rival, Sturla in Hvammur. Einarr's lineage is not known and it may well be that his parentage was not considered aristocratic; that we cannot know, but it is clear that he was a prominent householder in his area who aimed to keep independent of Sturla. We can apply the same model to householding priests like Erlendr and possibly Þorkell as to the chieftains of the early 12th century, only on a smaller scale. Becoming priests and owning churches was a way for ambitious householders of means, if not high birth, to assert their authority and prominence among their neighbours.

More spectacular are the examples of Hogni *auðgi* Þormóðarson in Bær (B) and Þórir *auðgi* Þorsteinsson in Deildartunga (B) in the 1170s and 1180s. Both were of low birth, Hogni was downright *ættsmár* (of insignificant family)² while Þórir was told by his prospective father-in-law, the chieftain Páll Sölvason, that even if Þórir was wealthy Páll would decide the terms of the marriage contract because Þórir was greatly inferior to them (*mun þykja mannamunr mikill*).³ As their nicknames indicate both were extremely wealthy and both sought to marry their children into chieftain families.

¹ They must have sold Hvammur sometime before Þoðvarr sold it to Sturla Þorðarson in 1150 - Sturl, 56

² Bsk I, 284

³ Sturl, 90-91, IA, 118

Högni was the better established of the two. He had married one daughter to a local magnate in Stafholt and another to a son of the chieftain at Garðar. It turned out that there was an impediment on account of affinity to the latter marriage, and Bishop Þorlákr (1178-93) made this a test case for his reform of marriage customs. It is a clear indicator of the aims and aspirations of Högni the priest that he put up fierce resistance to his bishop in defence of his marriage alliance and even went as far as trying to arrest the saint. He had also newly built a church at Bær when the dispute about his daughter's marriage broke out. The church there had not had a permanent ministry attached to it but it seems that Högni wanted to endow it adequately so it could support a priest or two.¹ He did not however want to donate the land of Bær itself - the core holding of the estate - but only satellite holdings.

Högni had to accept the annulment of the marriage but had his way with the endowment of his church. His agenda seems clear; he strove to consolidate Bær as a centre of his area by attaching a permanent ministry to the church there and he attempted to increase his influence and social standing through marriage alliances with chieftains in the region. As he had no sons his efforts did not result in an independent family of influence, but Bær became later in the 13th century one of the chief seats of his descendants among the Garðamenn.

The detail available to us on the priests Þórir and Högni is unusually rich but their likes, i.e. householding priests who were not chieftains but clearly men of local influence - whether aristocrats or not - are the most common type of priest mentioned in our sources in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Often we know very little about these householding priests; in some cases their social standing is indicated by marriages; Sámr Símonarson at Narfeyri (SD) for instance was married to a sister of the chieftain Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson and his daughter to the *stórbóndi* and priest Páll Hallsson of the Staðarhólmenn and this of course suggests that he was acceptable in respectable society.² The social status of others is suggested by their actions, like Árni priest in Skúmsstaðir (R) who invited Guðmundr Arason to stay with him in 1201.³ Sometimes no indications are available at all but there is only one example of a householding priest being described as impoverished.⁴

It goes without saying that being householders these priests already belonged to the upper strata of society. Where indications are available it seems however that they were furthermore the affluent and locally influential householders. Some may have been aristocrats who did not have grand political aspirations and were content to be well respected locally, but it seems that a sizeable proportion of householding priests

¹ In the 14th century there were two priests and a deacon at the church in Bær - DI III, 123-24

² Sturl, 49, 435, 457, 883, DI I, 464

³ Sturl, 196

⁴ Bsk I, 348-49 (322-23)

were men of non-aristocratic parentage who had in one way or other acquired wealth. The prejudice in Icelandic society against wealth accumulation, especially by non-aristocrats, is well known¹ and it seems likely that by becoming priests wealthy men of low birth sought social respectability. If we surmise that their aim was to have political influence in proportion to their economic strength, being priests served this aim in two ways; as it did for the chieftains it formalised and strengthened their relationship with, and influence over, their immediate neighbours and it may also have made them more acceptable company in polite circles.

It is usually not known whether householding priests owned the church and the land where they lived. It is usually assumed that they did and it seems that this was considered the norm. In several pre-14th century charters of annex churches it is allowed that a priest be permanently stationed at the church if he owns the land it stands on.² At the very least this suggests that it was considered normal, and possibly preferable, that priests owned the church they served and the land it stood on.

It seems therefore that the priesthood facilitated social mobility among the land-owning classes, making it easier for men of non-aristocratic status to increase their influence and possibly even move their families up a rung in the social ladder. This helped bring about a change in the system of social distinctions, where family and lineage became less significant and the type of land owned, and office held, more important as definitions of an individual's social standing.

While being priests seems to have helped to nudge some householders up the social ladder and aided others in halting their slide down it, these were insignificant changes compared to the opportunities opened up by posts at the sees and the institution of the district priest.

Except for Tjörvi Bǫðvarsson who was the aide of Bishops Gizurr, Þorlákr and Magnús of Skálholt and Bishop Jón's aides Hámundur Bjarnason, Jón's cousin Hjalti and his foreign teachers Gísli Finnason and Ríkinn at Hólar³ - none of which can be related to any known family or lineage - St Þorlákr is our earliest example of a non-householding priest.

St Þorlákr's ancestry is known in considerable detail and this supports his saga's claim that his parents were 'of good family and noble ancestry' (*góðrar ættar ok gofugra manna fram í kyn*) but it is clear that his parents and grandparents were not prosperous and probably not influential either. His father had been a merchant before he became a householder but it seems that he was not successful and the family was dissolved when Þorlákr was still young and he and his mother went to Oddi where he was taught by the

¹ Helgi Þorláksson 1991b 178

² DI I, 257(α2), 594, DI II, 113 Cf DI I, 266, 276-77, 466

³ Bysp I, 95-96, 104, Bsk I, 167-68 (239-40)

priest Eyjólfur Sæmundarson¹ That suggests that his mother was at least well connected although we do not of course know about the arrangements concerning her son's education. When he was ordained as priest - about the age of 19 - he became a district priest in a small but profitable ministry and his saga claims that these revenues made it possible for him to go abroad and study for six years in Paris and Lincoln. That sounds unlikely; although the costs involved in travelling and staying abroad are difficult to appreciate he must have had the backing of his earlier benefactors for such a prolonged, and it seems rare, expedition² When he returned he was with his relatives and had healthy finances but it is not clear whether he had pastoral responsibilities At the last minute he decided not to marry a widow who lived at the church-farm Háfur (R), the idea having been it seems that he would become a householding priest there Instead he became a district priest at the major church farm and later convent Kirkjubær in Síða (VS) under the priest Bjarnhéðinn Sigurðarson who was among the high-born of 1143 After six years at Kirkjubær he became prior of a new house of canons in Þykkvibær in Álftaver (VS) from where he progressed to become bishop of Skálholt.³

As his saga stresses St Þorlákr was extremely thrifty and a good manager of his own and his see's finances. This was in clear contrast to his parents who had faced financial ruin in his childhood and while a study of his character will not be attempted here, interesting as it would be, it seems that he became from an early age bent on improving his social station He probably would not have got far without the support of the Oddaverjar but his example shows how young men of impoverished family could, given the right circumstances, improve dramatically on their social station through the priesthood St Þorlákr is an example of a very successful priest but there were doubtless others who started off in similar circumstances as the saint but had less spectacular careers

St Þorlákr may have been of good family but its fortunes were sinking and his success in life represents a dramatic improvement on his prospects at birth. It was the other way around with the priest Ingimundur Þorgeirsson, the uncle of Guðmundr Arason later bishop of Hólar Ingimundur was the fourth son of the chieftain Þorgeirr Hallason and his ordination as priest can be seen as his opportunity to save himself from obscurity Of his three elder brothers the oldest one Einarr had died young it seems, Þorvarðr inherited the chieftaincy, while Þórðr spent his life as monk at Pverá Ingimundur's younger brother Ari was killed in the Norwegian civil wars in 1166 but had earlier fathered several children out of wedlock One of these children was Guðmundr, and when news of his father's death reached Iceland it was decided that as he did not inherit from his father on account of being illegitimate Guðmundr should be made

¹ Bysp I, 12, IF XI, 65, Bsk I, 89-90

² On the cost of education in the middle ages see Magnus Mar Lárusson 1967c 121-28

³ Bsk I 91-99 101

Ingimundr's charge and put to study.¹ In 1201 when Guðmundr had been chosen as bishop of Hólar but was still resisting, his uncle the chieftain Þorvarðr told him to obey his command to accept the appointment. Þorvarðr claimed that as the head of the family he had had authority over Guðmundr's father and other relatives of theirs and insisted on Guðmundr's obedience. Guðmundr thought he should decide himself and replied:

You did not offer me to inherit from my father and you have hitherto not sought to increase my honour except for having me beaten to study. It seems to me that you are more interested in getting me into trouble than esteem so I will not consent.²

This was probably intended by the author to be humorous, but there is also a clear sense that in chieftain families becoming a priest was in the second half of the 12th century considered to be a way of sidelining younger sons and illegitimate offspring.

Ingimundr the priest seems to have been a rootless man, or he may simply have been difficult to get along with because he lived in no less than nine places between 1168 and 1185. He had begun to keep house with his brother Þorvarðr but this arrangement only lasted for one year. He then moved to his brother-in-law where he stayed two years and from there he set up his own household first at Vaglir (E) for one year and then leasing Moðruvellir in Eyjafjörður (E) for another. When he lived at Moðruvellir he married Sigríðr Tumadóttir of the Ásbirningar, a very advantageous alliance, but the marriage did not work well so they moved to her father in Ás in Hegranes (Sk) but that did not work either and Ingimundr soon left and went to live at Grenjaðarstaður (Þ) where he presumably had pastoral responsibilities. He stayed there four years and then became a co-householder at Staður in Kaldakinn (Þ) for two years. He then made an abortive attempt to go abroad and lived in at least two places before he embarked for Norway again five years later. In Norway he held two benefices in four years before perishing in Greenland on his return trip to Iceland. *Prestsaga Guðmundar* makes much of Ingimundr and claims he was offered to become bishop of Greenland when he was in Norway but had refused.³ Ingimundr's career was singularly bumpy and he does not seem to have been one to grasp the opportunities when they appeared. His nephew Guðmundr whom he had raised from the age of six or seven and with whom he is said to have been strict because the boy resembled his kin in being uproarious and obstinate, took after his uncle and never stayed long in the same place.

Guðmundr followed his uncle around until he was seventeen, he was by then a deacon, and then spent two years in Saurbær (E) possibly for further education. In 1180 he and Ingimundr attempted to leave for Norway but the ship was caught in a

¹ Sturl, 101, 107

² [EKKI bauðstu mér að taka lé eltir loður minn og lítillar virðingar hefir þú mér leitað hér til nema láta berja mig til bækur. Enda sýnist mér sem þú viljir heldur koma mér í vanda en virðing og mun eg eigi þessu jata.] - Sturl, 201

³ Sturl, 107-22

storm and they narrowly escaped with their lives, Guðmundr with a badly broken leg. He then stayed with kinsmen in the Vestfirðir and tried his hand at litigation, with pathetic results. Guðmundr stayed with Þorgeirr son of Bishop Brandr of Hólar at Staður in Reynines (Sk) in 1183-85. Þorgeirr was a promising magnate and brought Guðmundr's litigation to a conclusion, an act of friendship which seems to have deeply influenced Guðmundr. Following the *Prests saga* it seems almost as if Þorgeirr was the only person ever to be nice to Guðmundr.

Guðmundr was ordained priest in March 1185 and became a district priest at the church in Hof in Hofðastrond, which was owned by his aunt and her husband, a minor chieftain. That same summer both Ingimundr and Þorgeirr left for Norway. On his return the following year Þorgeirr fell sick and died at sea and this, the *Prests saga* claims, caused a dramatic change of character in Guðmundr. He had become gradually more serious and spiritually inclined after he had broken his leg in 1180 but now he turned into a complete ascetic. His religious devotion soon became almost fanatic and he began to earn himself a reputation as a miracle worker.¹ He took on clerics for teaching and also seems to have started early to spend all his revenue on charity, and this it seems alarmed Bishop Brandr who made him move to the less profitable ministry of Miklibær in Óslandshlíð (Sk) and sometime later demanded he hand over the books and vestments Ingimundr had given to him when he went to Norway. Bishop Brandr claimed that the see of Hólar was Ingimundr's inheritor.² Guðmundr's popularity kept growing however and he was only two years at Miklibær, then a year at Viðvík (Sk) and in 1190 he became district priest at the major church-farm Vellir in Svarfaðardalur (E). There he stayed six years but when he declined to accept the *staðr* at Vellir as a benefice, whereby he would have had to take financial responsibility for it, he moved to nearby Ufsir (E). At about this time, in 1196, Guðmundr had become a national celebrity and started touring the country in the summer time, visiting the rich and famous and blessing and consecrating most things in his way. In 1198-99 he was back at Staður in Reynines (Sk) this time as a district priest in the household of the chieftain Kolbeinn Arnórsson but the year after he moved to Víðimýri (Sk), to the household of the chieftain Kolbeinn Tumason head of the Ásbirningar and overlord of Skagafjörður. In 1201 when Bishop Brandr died Kolbeinn Tumason acted swiftly and had Guðmundr appointed as bishop-elect.³

Guðmundr's rise to fame was first and foremost due to his extraordinary character and religious fervour. He owed his elevation to the see of Hólar to a miscalculation on the part of Kolbeinn Tumason who seems to have thought that

¹ On Guðmundr's religious views see Svanhildur Oskarsdóttir 1992.

² Sturl. 118-19. This must have been sometime after 1189 when Ingimundr disappeared - his body was not found until 1200 - IA, 121, 181, 477. This was then probably when Guðmundr was at Vellir (E).

³ Sturl. 120, 122, 171-74, 176-80, 196-202.

Guðmundr would be content with being religious and would leave real control in his hands. As it was Bishop Guðmundr turned out to be every chieftain's worst nightmare.

It seems clear that Guðmundr occupied a rung below his uncle in the social ladder. Ingimundr was the legitimate son of a chieftain and does not seem to have been a district priest in any of his many homes. Sometimes it is said that he held house together with the resident householder and in his four year stay at Grenjaðarstaður it can be assumed that he held a position of senior priest at the major church there.¹ Guðmundr on the other hand was illegitimate and fatherless and it does not seem that Ingimundr had trained him to take financial responsibilities. His kinsmen intended him to become just a district priest and it was probably resentment because of this which lay behind Guðmundr's response to his uncle Þorvarðr in 1201.

While Guðmundr was supposed to accept a slightly lower station in life than had belonged to his father, he was nevertheless extremely well connected through marriage alliances of his numerous kinsmen. There was hardly a region in the north and west of the country where he did not have relatives, and this he exploited to his advantage.

Ingimundr Þorgeirsson became a priest because he was a chieftain's younger son and it kept him from falling farther down the social ladder than he otherwise might have done. St Þorlákr and Guðmundr Arason on the other hand had meagre prospects at birth and for them the priesthood became a means to improve their station.

These three men were all aristocrats and many of the earliest district priests known to us seem to have been of high birth. That seems to be the case with Gellir Høskuldsson at Snóksdalur (SD);² Magnús Þórðarson at Mýrar (V)³ and Halldórr Hallvarðsson at Hof in Vopnafjörður (A).⁴ Others do however seem to have been of lower status. An example is Ljúfíni the priest who may have been a priest at Staðarhóll (SD),⁵ as was one Ívarr who was killed in a skirmish in 1170.⁶ At Sturla's household in Hvammur (SD) there were also district priests. The priest Ásbjörn was there in 1171 with his mother and sister who was the current concubine of Sturla's son Sveinn. Ásbjörn's brother had previously been a member of the household at Hvammur so it seems that the family had close ties with Sturla. Another priest called Oddr is mentioned in Hvammur at the same occasion and that one took part in the battle in Sælingsdalsheiði (SD).⁷

¹ In the 14th century there were three priests, a deacon, subdeacon and two minor clerics attached to the church at Grenjaðarstaður - DI II, 431-34. It was the most numerous staff at any church in the country.

² Sturl, 117, 249

³ Sturl, 897-98

⁴ Sturl, 200

⁵ Sturl, 64

⁶ Sturl, 72

⁷ Sturl, 76, 80

It is almost impossible to ascertain the status ascribed to men such as these. They often appear as any other domestics and do not seem to belong among respectable people but we cannot know whether they were menials in origin who were made priests by their householders, even as servile priests, or whether they were younger sons of householders who were starting out at the bottom. An example of the latter is the deacon Helgi Einarsson in Snóksdalur (SD) son of Einarr Bjarnason householder at the church-farm Kvennabrekka (SD). Helgi took to arms in defence of his householder and was killed for it.¹ While possibly not an aristocrat Helgi was clearly from a locally important family, but being part of the household at Snóksdalur decided his loyalties and actions

It goes without saying that just as we have success stories in St Þorlákr and Guðmundr Arason there must have been many failures and misfits among the illegitimate and younger sons of aristocratic parentage. We may well ask what happened to the likes of Brandr and Arn priests sons of Magnús Pálsson erstwhile chieftain of the Reykhyllingar after their father had surrendered his estate and his power to Snorn Sturluson.² They are never mentioned after their father's surrender and it is unlikely that they managed to do much better than becoming district priests. There were many casualties like these in the political turmoil of the late 12th and early 13th centuries which no doubt accounted for a large part of the supply of district priests.

Whatever the social origin of district priests they were as such subject to the head of the household they belonged to. They were therefore not independent persons and membership of the household was for the majority of them probably a more significant parameter than their ordination. There are over 60 examples of domestic priests in the late 12th and 13th centuries performing an array of tasks which have no relation to their pastoral duties, but are exactly like those of any other armed member of a household in dispute (see ch III 5.5). These priests are messengers, spies and bodyguards, they take part in war-parties and battles and they kill. It does not seem that in executing these tasks these priests were particularly troubled by a sense that being ordained made them less qualified. It seems that their identity as members of a household, or retinue as the case might be, was more important than their ordination as priests. It is likely that only the extremely well connected like St Þorlákr and Guðmundr Arason could afford to adopt their own identity as churchmen.

In the 12th century being a priest was first and foremost beneficial to chieftains and others of high rank. St Þorlákr and Guðmundr Arason were pioneers in forging an ecclesiastical identity for themselves and this was made possible only by their extraordinary connections. To most other priests their ordination was only an extra talent or skill which was useful to them in what we would consider a secular context. It

¹ Sturl, 249-50

² Sturl 211

is only in the mid 13th century that clear signs begin to appear that the Icelandic church was adopting a corporate identity and the clergy at large began to make clear distinctions between itself and laymen.

III 5.5 *The shaping of clerical identity*¹

In 1196 the sons of Þórðr Þórarinnsson in Laufás (E) thought they had left Qgmundr sneis for dead some distance from their farmstead. He had begged them to send him a priest to administer the last rites and they sent pastor Erpr from Laufás to administer to the dying man. When Erpr came to the site of the skirmish Qgmundr was however away and lived long after (d. 1237).²

Two years later the sons of Þórðr were on the defensive with the sons of Arnþrúðr against a revenge party led by Þorgrímr *alíkarl* for their part in the burning of Qnundr Þorkelsson in Langahlíð (E) in 1197. Þorgrímr and his men took their enemies by surprise in their beds in Laufás but promised Hákon, one of Þórðr's sons, safety (*gríð*). When pastor Erpr came on the scene he urged Hákon to go to the church and save his life. Hákon said he had received guarantees of safety and was anyway not allowed to go to the church. Erpr thought that Þorgrímr's men would break their promise of safety and claimed that he would take the responsibility if Hákon saved his life and went to the church. It seems that Hákon, gentleman that he was, thought that having received a guarantee of safety he must honour it on his part by not betraying their trust. Erpr on the other hand took a more practical view and was prepared to take upon himself the loss of honour as it seemed less important to him than life. Hákon did not budge and was subsequently executed. Having failed to convince the honour-conscious Hákon to save his life Erpr the priest opened up the church and then administered the last rites to three of the sons of Arnþrúðr. One of them however managed to shake himself free of his captors and got into the church and thus saved his life, while Hákon's brother Hildibrandr who also made a run for it only managed to grasp a corner post and was torn away and executed.

One of Qnundr's sons in the revenge party was the priest Vigfúss. He declared that it would be appropriate for him to execute Þorsteinn Arnþrúðarson, presumably for Þorsteinn's part in the killing of Vigfúss's brother Þorfinnr, but thought that being a priest made him unsuitable for the task.³

Erpr was clearly a district priest at Laufás and a member of Þórðr's household. His role in these episodes is very much what we would expect of a priest: he

¹ Guðrun Ása Grimsdóttir 1982 50-57, Helgi Þorláksson 1982a

² Sturl, 142

³ Sturl, 158-59

administers the last rites and concerns himself for the safety of one of his flock, but is otherwise not directly involved. He even attempted what seems an almost theological debate when he tried to persuade Hákon to value his life above his honour. Vigfúss Qnundarson's reluctance to execute Þorsteinn on account of being a priest also strengthens the impression given that priests had by this date acquired an identity of their own which defined what sort of actions befitted them and distinguished them from laymen.

There is no doubt that priests did have a special status on account of their ordination from an early stage. According to *Sturlu saga* Sturla Þórðarson and his son Sveinn had in the 1160s overpowered their neighbour and opponent the priest Erlendr Hallason in Ásgarður (SD) and Sturla asked Sveinn to execute him. Sveinn however excused himself on account of Erlendr having baptised him and Erlendr therefore saved his head.¹ In 1181 Sturla was still harassing people who got in his way. He had entered a dispute between his in-laws the Garðamenn and the Reykhyltingar regarding the inheritance of Þórir in Deildartunga (B). The fortunes of the Reykhyltingar's chieftain, the priest Páll Sölvason, were rapidly sinking when Jón Loptsson from Oddi decided to come to his aid. It was in his opinion not proper for powerful chieftains to pick fights with old and noble clergymen.² Páll also enlisted the support of his bishop, St Þorlákr. The saint said

Your dispute with Sturla does not seem fair to me, they are powerful and unscrupulous men but you are a venerable clergyman. I would like you to be on your guard and carry arms and defend yourself if it comes to that because you never know with men like these.³

It is added that Páll often forgot his weapons when he walked away from church and that this showed that he was not used to bearing arms.

It is likely that these attitudes reflect the author's world view rather than being accurate reports of Jón Loptsson's and St Þorlákr's reactions. Their replies are better understood as a part of the author's depiction of Sturla as a ruffian and vulgar oaf compared to respectable people like Páll Sölvason and Jón Loptsson.⁴ However that does not change the fact that these were considered by the author to be realistic attitudes which must therefore have been current in the first two decades of the 13th century when the saga was written.⁵

It is perfectly likely that from an early stage priests were expected to behave in certain ways and concern themselves with some matters more than others. That certain

¹ Sturl 70

² Sturl, 97

³ |Eigi þykir mér vera makleg deilan yður Sturlu. Þeir eru menn ríkir og kaldráðir en þú ert dyrlegur kennimaður. Nú vildi eg að þú værir var um þig og bærir vopn og verðir hendur þinar ef þú þarft þess við þvi að einiskis er fyrir þá orvænt | - Sturl, 97-98

⁴ Foote 1984a 9-30

⁵ ISB, 316

positive qualities were associated with the priesthood is suggested by its appeal to the chieftains in the 12th century but it is difficult to discern which qualities these were. Intelligence, responsibility and pacifism are likely options but whether they were associated with all priests or only those of high birth is doubtful. The evidence is that in the 12th and early 13th century there was no very sharp dividing line between priests and laymen and the priesthood as a whole did not have a corporate identity.

There were those, like St Þorlákr and Guðmundr Arason, who identified their fortunes with the church's and the number of such men was on the increase in the beginning of the 13th century. For the majority of priests however, whether they were householders or district priests, their secular identity continued to be more important to them than that of the priesthood. Out of 186 identifiable priests in the 12th and 13th centuries of whose actions some account is preserved, only 23 appear performing tasks related to their office. In most of these cases the priests are called on to administer extreme unction and it is true that there are many more accounts of extreme unction being administered without the priest involved being mentioned or identified. It is also true that our source material is not concerned with the daily chores of priests and we should therefore not expect detailed or numerous accounts of officiating priests. What is remarkable is the high number of priests who are on record doing very secular deeds; some which we would consider completely incompatible with a priest's office. There are 42 examples of priests initiating or joining disputes, 8 of priests joining war parties and 19 taking part in battles. Five priests are known to have killed but, as we shall discuss below, more lost their lives violently. In all there are 50 examples of priests being a principal party to a dispute - most of these were chieftains or major householders - and 53 examples of priests supporting others in disputes; giving advice, seeking help on behalf of others, giving shelter and food and raising war parties. Most of these were householders. Furthermore there are 65 examples of priests in dependent roles in disputes. These were either householders who followed their chieftains into battle or did them some service or members of chieftains' retinues who are found in a variety of roles, ranging from quite violent ones like taking part in battles to more peaceful, but sometimes dangerous, ones like being spies and messengers. Not included in the latter group are those priests who are found in chieftains' retinues entirely in their capacity as priests. These sometimes appear as advisers but more often as army chaplains. Except for this last group, which becomes visible in the first half of the 13th century, all the actions of these priests do not in any way differentiate them from other men. In fact it is often by chance only that we happen to know that somebody was a priest; the narrative sources are not consistent in giving such information and often it is only found in the annals or obituaries.¹ There is hardly any

¹ And these sources are not entirely consistent in giving information on people's ordinations either so there is a possibility that many more of the men mentioned in *Sturlunga saga* were priests

discernible relationship between ordination and behaviour which would allow us to identify more than a handful of priests as such if the sources did not contain the information. Just as becoming priests did not change the interests or conduct of chieftains, it does not seem to have affected greatly the behaviour patterns of householders and ordained servants.

The priest Páll Sǫlvason may have assumed a peaceful demeanour and abandoned his arms for symbols of his priesthood but this did not stop him from being a chieftain who could not budge an inch when it came to claims on a wealthy inheritance. In his dispute with the Garðamenn and Sturla in Hvammur over the inheritance of Þórir in Deildartunga Páll was just as obstinate as any other chieftain who could not afford a loss of face. And while he may not have carried arms it is unlikely, whatever St Þorlákr's advice, that he did not have under his command men who did. Being the politically weaker party in the dispute it would however not have been worth the risk for him to resort to violence; his high birth and the respectability of his office stood him in good stead when it came to recruit support among mightier chieftains, who took sides, it seems, on the basis of the social acceptability of the contestants rather than any strategic considerations. That at least is the interpretation of the author of *Sturlu saga* and that is why Páll's priestly qualities are stressed as a contrast to Sturla in Hvammur's more aggressive and hardhearted disposition. Had Páll been in a more favourable position it is unlikely that he would have let his ordination get in the way of vanquishing his adversaries in whatever manner was politically expedient.

In a similar way it is unlikely that the priest Erpr in Laufás (E) could have declined to undertake a mission like the one the priest Ljúfíni in Staðarhóll (SD) did for his householder and chieftain Einarr Þorgilsson in the 1160s. Ljúfíni was sent to replace the sheep of Einarr Ingibjargarson with those of his householder in island pastures which Einarr Þorgilsson claimed he had rights to. Ljúfíni performed his task with such a zeal that when an elderly tenant of Einarr Ingibjargarson's refused to lend him a boat to transport the sheep the priest struck the householder with an axe.¹ There is no reason to expect that Ljúfíni was any more wicked than Erpr or that his pastoral duties were performed with any less zeal. Nor is there reason to expect that Erpr would have declined to take up arms to defend his household had he been given the opportunity. He can hardly have been much different from the priest Þorkell Bergþórsson who defended himself bravely in the battle of Hólar in 1209 against the enemies of Bishop Guðmundr Arason.² Or the priest Skeggi who attacked Norwegian merchants after they had killed the chieftain Ormr Jónsson and his son Jón in Vestmannaeyjar (R) in 1218, and was killed as a result, or the priest Héðinn who was

¹ Sturl, 64

² Sturl 222-23

killed in his own churchyard with his chieftain Björn Þorvaldsson in the battle at Breiðabólstaður (R) in 1221.¹

For these priests their membership of a household was more important in shaping their loyalties, and hence behaviour, than their ordination. What they did not have and what Icelandic priesthood in general lacked until the middle of the 13th century was a common identity supported by the authority of the bishops. The reason lay partly in the social order which made it difficult for the bishops to identify with their priests as a homogeneous group with common interests but ultimately it lay in the economic foundations of the church. As long as most ecclesiastical property was essentially under secular control priests continued to place their loyalties according to the ownership of the land which sustained them, rather than in an institution which could do little to protect them. This situation began to be reversed in the middle of the 12th century, particularly with the foundation of the monasteries; these created a small body of men who could be in no doubt that their loyalties lay with God and the institution he had provided for their upkeep. It did however take a long time before the growth of the church as an institution began to affect the majority of priests, i.e. those who had pastoral responsibilities. It may be that we can detect a sign of change in the behaviour of the priest Jón Halldórsson in the burning of Flugumýri (Sk) in 1253. He seems to have been the household priest at Flugumýri and when the houses had been set on fire and Eyjólfur *ofsi* and his men were charging the wedding party room by room, he did not have arms but did his bit by encouraging the defenders and throwing clothes on the weapons of the attackers.² It seems clear from this that pastor Jón did not own weapons but whether he would have taken to arms had there been some available we cannot know. It may be that pastor Jón showed incredible restraint in not trying to do bodily harm to the attackers in what must have been an extremely harrowing situation.

In this context it is worth looking at the statistics for the number of ordained men who were killed or executed in the 12th and 13th centuries as they seem to be genuinely reflective of social change

	all killings of priests	all killings of men in lesser ordinations	Total killings of ordained men	killings of ordained men recorded in annals
1126-1150	3	0	3	2
1151-1175	6	0	6	5
1176-1200	3	0	3	2
1201-1225	13	8	21	3
1226-1250	4	5	9	3
1251-1275	1	0	1	0
1276-1300	0	0	0	0
Total	30	13	43	15

Table 12 Number of killed clerics by period

¹ Sturl, 255, 267-68. Skeggi may have been the father of Héðinn - PP, 59

² Sturl 636

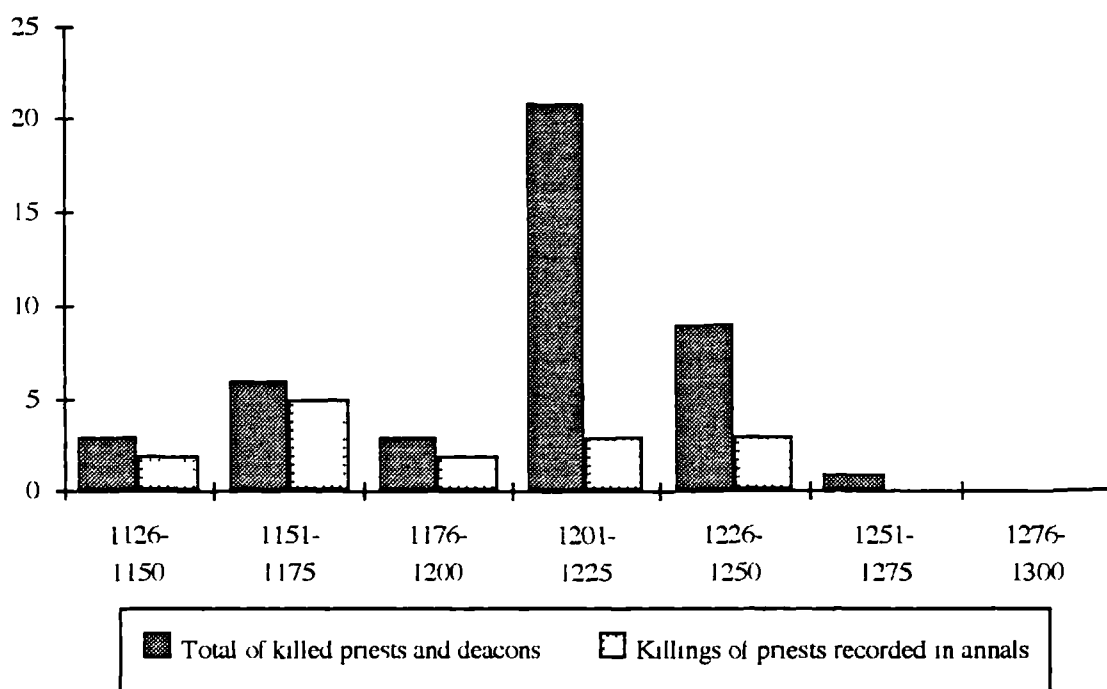


Figure 2 Numbers of killed priests in all sources compared to those mentioned in annals

The high number of total recorded killings of priests in 1201-50 is due to the detailed nature of the sources dealing with this period. But it is also a reflection of the warfare and violence in Icelandic society which characterised this period in particular. It is interesting to compare these figures with the number of killed priests recorded in the annals because it is to be expected that in them the same criteria are applied in the selection of entries in all periods. The annals should therefore give a less biased picture of the development of priests' involvement in violent conflict. The figures extracted from the annals suggest that there may have been an outburst of violent conflict in 1151-75 or, more accurately, that in this period there were particularly many men involved in conflict and who were important enough to be mentioned in annal entries who were priests. The figures also suggest that violence was a permanent feature of conflict in all periods down to 1250. Large scale warfare ceased around 1260, but no clerics are known to have taken part in battles after 1244, and no priest after 1232¹. This seems to indicate changes in the status of priests, especially when considering that large scale warfare was limited to the period 1238-1259 and clerics seem to have had little part in it, in sharp contrast with earlier periods when clerics appear on every scene with sword in hand.

¹ That is excepting priests like pastor Jon at Flugumyrri (Sk) who were caught up in violent conflict through no intention of their own.

We have already discussed how the church gradually gained greater control over ecclesiastical property (ch. III 3.4) and how the leadership of the church began in the late 12th century to put pressure on clerics to distance themselves from secular affairs and create a separate social class of churchmen (ch. III 4.3). In the following chapters we will look at how these changes are reflected in the social conditions of clerics in the 13th century. Following a discussion on signs of increased specialisation of ordained men in service, the emphasis on conciliation as a special calling of churchmen will be considered. Finally the introduction of the idea of clerical celibacy will be treated.

III 5.5.1 *Professional skills. Scribes and counsellors*

In ch. III 5.3 it was argued that the law considered a priest as a kind of skilled person who was qualified to perform certain tasks but was not in other ways different from other people. Much in the same way as a shipwright would be expected to spend his day in the shipyard building a ship and could be called upon to repair a damaged ship, so the priest would be expected to spend the day in church singing mass and reciting the hours and could be called upon to baptise, visit the sick, administer extreme unction and recite funeral rites. Over supper priest and shipwright might have a special status in the household on account of their craft, but they would nevertheless be subject to the head of the household and would take orders from him or her.

This interpretation fits well the available evidence for the status of district-priests in the second half of the 12th century. In the first half of the 13th century a new dimension is added to the career opportunities of priests as a result of the increasingly complex administrative needs of chieftains. It is likely that great and distinguished chieftains had relied on clerics to write letters in the 12th century but it does not seem from the conduct of rank and file chieftains like Sturla in Hvammur that exchange of letters was a mode of communications which came naturally to them. It was probably only in the circle of literate chieftains that letters circulated and the indications are that this circle was still very small in the 12th century. Political conflict in the 12th century was also more relaxed than it became in the 13th and chieftains could still settle their affairs in person.

By 1200 this was changing. In the winter 1200-1201 the deacon Lambkárr Þorgilsson (d. 1249) who had newly joined Guðmundr Arason's retinue had taken care of all letter making for Kolbeinn Tumason when he was at home in Víðimýri, but when Kolbeinn took over the household at Hólar following Bishop Brandr's death in August 1201 Lambkárr was shunned as a scribe in favour of the priest Kygri-Björn.¹ There was clearly professional rivalry between Lambkárr and Kygri-Björn as the author of

¹ Sturl, 203

Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar - who may have been Lambkárr himself or someone very sympathetic to him - proceeds to vilify Kygri-Björn who 'immediately became cool towards the bishop-elect [i.e. Guðmundr] because he felt he was not regarded highly enough by him. Thus it was at once predicted which later transpired with Björn because that jealousy grew in him and increased as it lasted longer.'¹

The men of the Northern diocese elected Kygri-Björn as their bishop in 1236 but he died in 1237 or 1238 without having been consecrated.² Kygri-Björn seems to have been resident at Hólar in 1201 and had probably been Bishop Brandr's scribe so Kolbeinn's preference for him over the less experienced Lambkárr was probably justified. Kygri-Björn seems to have stayed with Kolbeinn's household after he moved from Hólar and some time after Kolbeinn's death in 1208 Kygri-Björn went abroad and was in Rome shortly before the Lateran council in 1214. He came back to Iceland in 1224³ and seems to have been attached to the household of Sighvatr Sturluson in Grund in Eyjafjörður (E).⁴ As the author of *Prestssaga Guðmundar* alludes, Kygri-Björn was considered the leader of the clerical opposition to Bishop Guðmundr.⁵ He is an early example of a career priest who did not quietly rise to prominence within a bishop's household, like some of the 12th century bishops had done, but by making his clerical skills available to chieftains. We do not know enough about Kygri-Björn's position vis-à-vis the chieftains Kolbeinn and Sighvatr to appreciate to what extent he was his own man. His trips abroad and authorship of *Mariu saga* suggest that if he was a chieftain's client he was at least a highly regarded and pampered one.

Forty years after deacon Lambkárr's humiliation he appears again, this time with the title of abbot and attached to Sturla Þórðarson's household in Staðarhóll (SD). Kolbeinn *ungr* had arrested Sturla in the aftermath of Snorri Sturluson's killing and taken him to Flugumýri (Sk). Lambkárr came there with a message from the priest Páll Hallsson in Narfeyri (SD) and other followers of Sturla that they would become the friends of Kolbeinn if he let Sturla go. It was then agreed that Sturla acknowledged Kolbeinn's overlordship and Lambkárr was with him when he swore the oath to Kolbeinn. It is not clear whether Lambkárr swore as well although it seems likely from the context. Lambkárr did not accompany Sturla on his way back to the west but came

¹ [slo þegar læð á við biskupselni því að hann þottist of lítls metinn af honum og spaði það þegar fyrir er síðar kom fram við Björn því að sjá ofund læddist með honum og var þess meiri er hún hafði lengur staðið] - Sturl, 203

² Sturl, 382-83, IA, 130, 188, 327. Kygri-Björn died on his way back from Rome which may suggest that the archbishop had raised objections to his suitability and that he had sought papal dispensation. Abbot Arngrímur claims that he was illegitimate - Bsk II, 186. See ch III 4.2

³ Sturl, 289. That homecoming can of course have been after a second trip abroad. Kygri-Björn witnessed a charter of Kirkjubær (VS) in 1216/26 - DI I, 395 and as most of the witnesses were local men it suggests that at the time he lived in the south - possibly attached to the house of canons in Þykkvibær (VS)

⁴ Bsk II, 92, 147

⁵ Bsk II, 186

a while later with the task of supervising the oath-takings of the men of Fellsstrond, Skarðsstrond and Saurbær on Kolbeinn's behalf.¹

Lambkár's title of abbot seems to have been honorary; there are at least no indications that he was associated with any monastery; if this was the abbacy of Hítardalur (B), the monastery there was with little doubt long defunct at this time (see ch. III 3 5). It is more likely that he owed his title to Bishop Guðmundr who may have appointed a trusted follower like Lambkár as an anti-abbot of one of the monasteries in the north or simply invented the distinction as a reward for dutiful service. It is at least clear that Lambkár was an adherent of Sturla but was, on account of his clerical status, also neutral enough to be a credible messenger. And rather than having to talk his own followers into submission to Kolbeinn it was less humiliating for Sturla to let the more detached Lambkár do the work. From Kolbeinn's point of view it was also advantageous to make a respectable cleric supervise the oath-takings; while secular chieftains were loath to break their oaths, they did break them if they felt it was politically justified, but churchmen on the other hand were not likely to become oath-breakers. Sturla never openly challenged Kolbeinn *ungi* but he supported his enemies and Kolbeinn cannot have realistically hoped to get more out of Sturla's submission. But through Lambkár he could get through to Sturla's followers and important allies in the west and this, he could realistically hope, could have made a difference at least insofar as it made it more difficult for Sturla to rally his followers against Kolbeinn.

It is in capacities like these that we meet several clerics in the first half of the 13th century attached to the households of great chieftains. They were no ordinary district priests whose main tasks were singing masses and visiting the sick. They were often men of good family, like Lambkár, and of considerable learning and erudition, like Styrmir Kárason, who commanded respect in their own right. It was this quality which made them valuable to their chieftains; they were not only useful as scribes and counsellors but their high social status and ecclesiastical credentials made them extremely useful in negotiations and every kind of contact with other chieftains. The thing was that chieftains usually had no reason to trust each other but they could agree to trust in a respectable cleric acting as proxy for his chieftain. An extreme example of deep-felt mistrust being overridden by confidence in clerical handshakes is when in 1228 a truce was established between Sturla Sighvatsson and his uncle and bitter enemy Snorri Sturluson. They had agreed on a meeting but Snorri did not turn up, sending instead his priest Styrmir Kárason and his chief ally the chieftain Þorleifr in Garðar. Sturla did not trust this arrangement and refused to shake hands with them but made one of his men shake hands with Þorleifr and his priest Torfi Guðmundsson shake the hand of Styrmir Kárason.²

¹ Sturl. 455, 457

² Sturl. 308-309

Of priests of this type Torfi Guðmundsson is the best example on account of the relatively detailed accounts of his role in Sturla's service. Torfi is first mentioned in 1223 when Sturla was making friends with Þorvaldr *Vatnsfirðingr*. The two met in Saurbær (SD) and held their discussions in the company of Torfi the priest and Snorri Narfason the priest from Skarð (SD). The talks went well and they promised each other mutual support. To seal their alliance both of them handed their *godorð* to Torfi and had him ride to the Alþing and thus represent both of them as one.¹ In 1227 when Sturla was home in Sauðafell Torfi was approached there by a group of men who had killed a follower of Sturla's cousin Dufgus in Hjarðarholt and wounded Dufgus himself. Torfi convinced Sturla to mediate on their behalf in order to secure the support of the attackers' in-laws in Fellsstrond (SD). A settlement was reached whereby Sturla and his uncle Þórðr Sturluson who then lived in Hvammur arbitrated.² Uncle and nephew however did not hold the peace for long; Þórðr ignored Sturla in his plans for the governance of the region and Sturla expressed his anger by attacking Þórðr's household in Hvammur. A complete stalemate ensued, complicated by a dispute between Sturla and Bishop Guðmundr who was then in the region. The following winter Torfi the priest went back and forth between Sturla and Þórðr attempting to mediate a settlement and before Lent they agreed to talk.³ These were busy times for Torfi as Sturla's enemies were in no short supply. In the summer of 1228 Þorvaldr *Vatnsfirðingr*, Sturla's one time ally, was with Snorri Sturluson in Reykholt and Sturla sent Torfi to him to ask him to mediate between him and Snorri.⁴ Þorvaldr did nothing but there followed the truce where Torfi shook hands with Styrmir Kárason. In the spring of 1230 Torfi was again with Sturla, this time at a peace meeting in Skálanes (SD) between Sturla and the sons of Þorvaldr *Vatnsfirðingr*.⁵ In 1232 Torfi headed the household in Hjarðarholt, a reward it seems for loyal service. The sons of Þorvaldr came to him there and he immediately sent word to Sturla but he also offered to mediate on their behalf. They refused, trusting in an earlier truce, rode on the following day and were intercepted and executed by Sturla after a brief skirmish.⁶ Torfi is not heard of after this. In 1242 the sons of Dufgus lived in Hjarðarholt⁷ and he may have been dead by then.

It is clear that Torfi belonged to a very different league from Sturla's other priests, Sveinn Þorvaldsson who was wounded in his bed in Sauðafell in 1228 when the sons of Þorvaldr *Vatnsfirðingr* attacked Sturla's household, or Þorkell who was in

¹ Sturl. 286

² Sturl. 299

³ Sturl. 303

⁴ Sturl. 305

⁵ Sturl. 327

⁶ Sturl. 335

⁷ Sturl. 461-62

Sturla's party when he finally finished them off in Hundadalur (SD) in 1232.¹ Torfi was probably a full-time counsellor of Sturla's; an indispensable agent in the increasingly complex existence of a 13th century chieftain. Of others like him we have already met Lambkárr Þorgilsson in Sturla Þórðarson's household and Styrmir Kárason (d. 1245) in Snorri Sturluson's household.² Halldórr Oddsson seems to have had this function in the household of Þórðr Sturluson in Staðarstaður (SD)³ and Ísarr Pálsson in that of Kolbeinn *ungi* and later Brandr Kolbeinsson.⁴ Torfi is the only one of these priests whose family is unknown; the others were all of aristocratic descent; Lambkárr was of the Staðarhólmenn,⁵ Ísarr of the Oddaverjar⁶ and Styrmir is believed to have been the son of Kári abbot of Þingeyrar 1181-87 son of Rúnólfr the priest son of Bishop Ketill Þorsteinsson and thus of the Mǫðruvellingar.⁷

Halldórr Oddsson was the son of Oddr Jóseppson, householder in Búðardalur (SD), who was of respectable if not aristocratic family and one of Sturla in Hvammur's more important followers.⁸ It is interesting that in this case the relationship between a householding father and his chieftain is maintained in the second generation between priest and chieftain. It is likely that Sturla in Hvammur had offered Oddr to foster his son - Sighvatr Sturluson calls Halldórr his *fóstbróðir*⁹ - and Halldórr may have been a younger son who did not stand to inherit his father's farmstead. If it was the Sturlungar who had him educated and ordained, as seems likely, it would be an important insight into their approach to being chieftains. Instead of copying successful families like the Haukdælir and Oddaverjar and becoming priests themselves they nurtured young men from families loyal to them and made them their priests. This was of course a similar approach to that which the Haukdælir had long before adopted towards the episcopacy; as soon as it became more cumbersome than profitable for a chieftain to be a bishop a safe and dependable protégé like Þorlákr Rúnólfsson had to be found (ch. III 4.1).

It is with a division of labour of this kind that the early 13th century chieftains managed to expand their powers and consolidate their hold over larger areas than had previously been possible. Instead of working alone or in father-and-son or brother and brother teams, which had invariably proved troublesome, short-lived and ineffective, the foundations for administrative structures were being laid by the resident counsellor-priests. From the point of view of the chieftains it was ideal to have at their side men

¹ Sturl, 312, 314, 337, 339

² On Styrmir: Sturl, 308-309, 328-29, 430, IA, 131, 189, 328, 481, DI I, 496, 513, DI II, 85, ÍF I, 397, ÍF XIII, 97, Flat II, 67, 68, 118, 533, III, 237, Hannes Þorsteinsson 1912 126-48, Jón Jóhannesson 1942 88-89, 137-40, ÍF XIII, xlv-lxvii, Sigurður Nordal 1914 69-72, Lonroth 1968

³ Sturl, 185-86, 320, DI II, 165

⁴ Sturl, 355, 428, 537

⁵ Bsk I, 460-61, 464

⁶ Sturl, 428

⁷ Hannes Þorsteinsson 1912 126-48, ÍF I, civ

⁸ Sturl, 69-76

⁹ Sturl, 320

who could perform a variety of managerial tasks as well as representing them with other chieftains but who did not have ambitions to become chieftains themselves. It is having different ambitions which made these priests useful to the chieftains and in order to keep being useful these priests had to stress their separate identity as churchmen.

This class of priest was probably never large, there were probably not more than a dozen in the first half of the 13th century, but it was nevertheless a significant addition to the very small nucleus of clerics at the episcopal sees and monasteries who had adopted an ecclesiastical identity. It was a significant addition because these were high-born and, more importantly, very visible priests who were in a position to influence the views of both aristocracy and clergy of what a priest should be like. It is in their roles as intermediaries and mediators that the new clerical identity is crystallised. Their success in mediation depended on their being able to make both sides in a dispute trust them and this no doubt depended to a degree on their personalities but also on their professional capacity as priests. It was a useful shortcut for everyone involved, instead of having to establish the benevolence and neutrality of a mediator through experience it was expected of a priest that he was endowed with these qualities.

Finding strength in their capacity as mediators it is not surprising that men of the church began to stress that conciliation was a special calling of theirs, and that this in turn strengthened the institutional image of the church and the shared identity of its clergy.

III 5 5 2 *Conciliation The case of Abbot Brandr Jónsson.*

As we have seen, there were by the end of the 12th century, notions in place that priests should preferably not be involved in conflict. In the cases of Páll Sǫlvason in Reykholt and Vigfúss Qnundarson however this only stretched as far as hindering them from wielding weapons, it did not prevent them from taking part in disputes or ordering others to commit violent acts. Páll and Vigfúss were both aristocrats and it was rare in the 13th century that men of that calibre, even if they took part in battles, carried out the actual killings or executions themselves¹. It may be a sign of ecclesiastical influence on aristocratic behaviour that 13th century chieftains preferred not to soil their hands with blood even if they were not ordained. And it is probably no coincidence that it was often those chieftains who were not ordained and came from families who had had little involvement with the church who found the strongest need to stress publicly their

¹ Sometimes a chieftain's sword-thrust may have had a symbolic or ritual significance as when Þorvarðr Þorarinsson cut the already captured and bleeding Þorgils *skarði* with his sword and then ordered one of his men to behead Þorgils - Sturl. 736. He could of course just have been fumbling.

religious fervour and respect for the church. Kolbeinn Tumason is remembered equally for his highhandedness with Bishop Guðmundr and his treatment of the see of Hólar as his own property as for the simple gracefulness of his religious poetry.¹ Another such chieftain was Þórðr *kakali* who before instigating a particularly violent phase in the civil wars publicly announced his resolve not to seize men who had sought sanctuary in churches whatever offences he held against them.²

The reluctance of Páll and Vigfúss to inflict bodily harm in person is therefore primarily a sign of the refining influence the church had had on the upper classes; as we have seen, less prestigious priests continued to kill, maim and be killed well into the 13th century. There were however powerful pressures in place trying to distance the church as a whole from every kind of secular conflict and others which would stress its role as a peacemaker. As we discussed in ch. III 4.3 the Icelandic bishops received a series of letters from the archbishops of Niðarós in the last quarter of the 12th century in which the basic theme was to exhort clerics to distance themselves from secular conflict and to establish the immunity of priests. No immediate change set in as a result of these letters but they no doubt had an influence which began to be felt in the 13th century. The ideals which these letters propagated were those of the reforming papacy belatedly arriving in Scandinavia. These ideals do form the ideological background of reformers like Bishop Guðmundr *góði* and were no doubt the standard against which well educated priests in chieftains' retinues measured themselves.

Complete withdrawal from the bloody world of secular strife did not however become an ideal for the main current of opinion within the Icelandic church in the 13th century. The authors of *Hungrvaka* and *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða* both emphasised pacification as an ideal of the church. For the author of *Hungrvaka* writing in the first one or two decades of the 13th century the ideal bishop was able to enforce peace but this was more along the lines of forcing a resolution by taking sides in a dispute rather than through successful mediation. This ideal bishop was a sort of optimal chieftain; extremely benevolent and extremely powerful, a Jón Loptsson in a mitre. The author of *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða* writing towards the middle of the 13th century was also concerned with peace but in his world the clergy were preferably not involved in the conflict itself but intervened successfully on behalf of fairness and good sense. By the 1240s no chieftain could pretend he aimed primarily to contain violence and uphold the peace - a view late 12th century chieftains like Jón Loptsson had managed to promote of themselves - on the contrary it had become abundantly clear to everyone that chieftains were the principal source of violence in society. This of course affected the attitude of the church which instead of trying to live up to a, no doubt completely illusory, ideal of a chieftain's government began to define its own agenda and field of

¹ Skjald II, 45-49, Paasche 1948 153-56, Lange 1958 84

² Sturl, 498, also 496

operations. It began to influence the course of events not through direct participation but by occupying the third side to every conflict, the sensible and peaceful one.

The official leadership of the Icelandic church did not take the lead in this field until after the deaths of Bishops Guðmundr and Magnús in 1237. Even if Bishop Guðmundr would probably have embraced the ideal of pacification in theory his own combative stance against the chieftains and many of his own priests hardly made him a champion of peace. Bishop Magnús on the other hand seems to have been a diligent administrator¹ and often mediated and arbitrated in disputes² but his position as a married chieftain and brother of one of the most powerful chieftains in the country made him an unlikely rallying point for those who would stress their ecclesiastical identity. In the last 10 years of his episcopacy Magnús's position seems to have been precarious; he narrowly escaped being deposed in 1226 and a replacement was elected even before his death.³

It is however in the 1230s that signs of change begin to emerge. In 1232 a priest called Knútr was in Bishop Guðmundr's retinue. Knútr's valet had wounded Jón Birnuson, another of Bishop Guðmundr's followers, and after he had recovered Jón used the first opportunity and killed Knútr. It is explained that Knútr always carried weapons because he was unruly and had been deprived of his priesthood (*óðæll ok embættislaus*)⁴ In 1242 one Snorn Þórálfrsson arrived in Iceland in the retinue of Þórðr *kakali*. He had been a priest and had followed Bishop Guðmundr but 'was then a layman' (*var þá leikmaðr*) because he had been involved in the killing of Knútr the priest in 1232.⁵ Snorn had become a follower of Þórðr *kakali* as early as 1235⁶ but whether he had lost his ordination then is uncertain. The killing of Knútr represents the final collapse of order in Bishop Guðmundr's retinue and he was soon afterwards interred at Hólar and the following dispersed. Bishop Guðmundr seems to have tried to maintain discipline among his followers as Knútr's expulsion from office suggests, but

¹ Bsk I, 507 [Fêrð frændseme ok úmegð], IA 125, 184, Bsk I, 545 [boðorða breytne Magnúss biskups i messu], IA, 382 - Grg Ia, 36-37, DI I, 423-63

² Sturl, 254, 264, 284, 296, 349, 359-61, 382

³ IA, 127, 479, 480, 129, 256, 130; Sturl, 382

⁴ Sturl, 323 Knútr was a very uncommon name in Iceland and it may be that this Knútr belonged to the same family as Guðmundr Knutsson who was among the high-born priests in the northern quarter in 1143 - DI I, 186 NID, 688-89, NIDs, 565 *Lmbætti* here probably refers to holy orders rather than an ecclesiastical appointment cf. [Hogni misti embættis sins, sakir svika þeirra, er hann hafði saman dregit óleytt hjonalag] - Bsk I, 285₁₃ - which is not unambiguous either - and [kaupa þionustu mann þann er til kyckiu bere elld ok ok vinna það allt sem hun þar nauðsynlega so ad kennimenn meigi þar veýta fyrir þær saker Guds Embætti] - DI II, 441-43 [skal þessæ wor gerdh standa æfvínliga frá þeim toll manadæ dægi sæm græindh halikirkia ær fullgiorð suo ath væl megi j hennæ syngia oc hon er uel standandæ oc uel songhær sæm gudz embætti til bærr oc hon ær vigh]- DI IV, 454-55, [herra Laurencius byskop reiste spitala at Kurabeck j Olafsfirde prestum ollum till vidrveniss þeim sem þrotna kunnu at elle edr krankleika ok ei voru embættiss ferr] - IA, 269-71

⁵ Sturl, 457 It is possible that Snorn Þórálfrsson was the same priest as the Snorn who was castrated along with Knútr in Grimsey in 1222 - Sturl, 277

⁶ Sturl, 372

whether it was Guðmundr who had disciplined Snorri and whether it was the same kind of punishment is unclear. It is clear that Snorri was no longer a priest in 1242 whereas Knútr may have kept his title and only been banned from officiating and it is possible that Snorri's harsher punishment was a result of him having to answer to ecclesiastical authorities in Norway during his stay there with Þórðr *kakali* in 1238-42.

It was of course only through being seen to keep tight discipline on its clergy that the church could claim to be a harbinger of peace. With the arrival of two Norwegian bishops in Iceland in 1239 the Icelandic church finally acquired a leadership which could work towards shaping its corporate identity. Two fields of operations can be identified; on the one hand a wedge was driven between the clergy and secular society by insisting on clerical celibacy and on the other stress was laid on the institutional interest of the church in peace and a more practicable political system. Clerical celibacy will be considered in the subsequent chapter but let us here look more closely at the church's involvement with politics and its emphasis on pacification in the 1240s to 1260s.

Bishop Bótólfur of Hólar (1238-46) does not seem to have been a great achiever. He was an Augustinian canon from Helgisetur near Niðarós whereto he returned in 1243 leaving only memories of his lack of clout.¹ Both his colleague at Skálholt, Bishop Sigvarðr Þéttmarsson (1238-68), and his successor at Hólar, Bishop Heinrekr Kársson (1247-60), were on the other hand energetic administrators. Heinrekr in particular was an active power-broker supporting whichever chieftain who looked like furthering the cause of King Hákon. Bishop Sigvarðr's political aims are less clear; he did take sides but was much less confrontational than Bishop Heinrekr and was more often involved in mediation and arbitration. Sigvarðr had been an abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Selja in Norway and seems to have been selected on account of his ecclesiastical credentials, whereas Heinrekr seems to have owed his appointment to the trust King Hákon placed in him. Bishop Heinrekr was however not simply a tool of King Hákon's; his commitment to the church is evidenced by his insistence on clerical celibacy and he no doubt justified his involvement in secular politics on the grounds that the interests of the church were best served if effective political authority was established in the country.

While neither Heinrekr nor Sigvarðr were particularly angelic figures they cut a sharp contrast to their predecessors in that they commanded great respect and were for instance able to use excommunication effectively in politics. The difference was that the Norwegian bishops were in no doubt about their role and affiliations; they were there to protect and advance the interests of the church and they seem to have had a much clearer view of what constituted the church and set it apart from the rest of

¹ Sturl, 430, 1A, 131, 189, 256, 328, Bsk II 186-87



society. It is their attitude and sense of direction rather than their actual efforts which became an important example for the increasing numbers of Icelandic clergy who were adopting an ecclesiastical identity

As we have seen in the previous chapter, a small but influential number of clerics were in the beginning of the 13th century building careers on their special status as priests. To such priests bishops who would underline the separateness of the clergy and special concerns of the church were no doubt welcome. The presence of such bishops no doubt also helped householding-priests to distance themselves from secular strife in the 1250s when the stakes had been raised too high for anyone but the most powerful. Several householding priests, who had earlier been actively supportive of one chieftain or other or even had aspirations to power themselves, began to channel their political involvement towards mediation in the 1250s. The evidence for this sort of change of allegiance is not however plentiful or unambiguous; there were many other developments affecting political involvement in the 1240s and 1250s and in general political conflict was increasingly becoming the speciality of a handful of overlords and their men at arms. Local leaders - who were as often as not priests - had in the 1230s and early 1240s seen their fortunes linked with those of their overlords and followed them diligently but by the early 1250s it was becoming clear that the overlords' control was extremely fragile and that the local leaders often did better by staying out of harm's way and looking after their home-patch. Four out of the five noteworthies who came to mediate between Hrafn Oddsson on one side and Þorgils *skarði* and Sturla Þórðarson on the other at the fortification in Sauðafell (SD) in 1257 were householding priests. But whether this tells us that many local leaders were still priests at this late point or that householding priests were the only local leaders who dared involve themselves because their clerical status would protect them from having to become actively involved is a difficult question. On the one hand it is clear that Ketill Þorláksson in Kolbeinsstaðir (B), Guðmundr Ólafsson in Miklaholt (B), Páll Hallsson in Langidalur (SD) (formerly in Narfeyri (SD)) and Snorri Þórðarson in Staðarfell (SD) made up the majority of prominent leaders in the west at the time and while householding-priests were becoming rare nationally at this time it may be either a coincidence or a regional peculiarity that all these were priests. On the other hand their neutral position is suggested by the fact that following the truce and subsequent discussions between Þorgils, Sturla and Hrafn it was decided that Páll, Snorri and the priest Snorri Narfason from Skarð (SD) would arbitrate on behalf of Sturla and Þorgils and that Guðmundr and the priest Þorkell from Síðumúli (B) and a layman on behalf of Hrafn.¹ This does suggest that while these priests were seen to belong to different sides of the conflict they were at the same time considered trustworthy by both parties; that they saw their

¹ Sturl. 728-29

role as dampening rather than fuelling conflict and that their role and perceived trustworthiness was a consequence of their being priests.

Much clearer and more consistent evidence for ecclesiastical emphasis on pacification comes to us through the activities of Brandr Jónsson, abbot of Þykkvibær (VS) 1247-63 and bishop of Hólar 1263-64. Unlike householding priests, whose position was always influenced by their ties with the land, the monastic clergy, and the abbots in particular, had both the room to manoeuvre and the incentive to put themselves up as intermediaries and peacemakers. Monastics and monastic life go largely unnoticed in our sources until the middle of the 13th century when several abbots begin to appear at peace meetings and try to avert battles. Of these Brandr Jónsson was the most prominent and we are blessed with relatively detailed accounts of his involvement in politics which makes it possible to examine his - and by inference the church's - attitude towards political conflict.

Brandr was of the Svínfellingar;¹ the only son of his father's second marriage to Halldóra Arnórsdóttir of the Ásbirningar. His older legitimate half-brother Ormr (d. 1241) succeeded their father as the family's chieftain in Svínafell (A) and the illegitimate half-brother Þórarinn (d. 1239) inherited the family's newly acquired chieftaincies in Austfirðir. From the time of Brandr's youth his family ruled the whole eastern quarter and it remained throughout the 13th century one of the most constant powers in Icelandic politics. Through his mother and aunt Ásdís Sigmundardóttir wife of Arnórr Tumason (d. 1221) Brandr was closely related to the Ásbirningar of Skagafjörður. Brandr therefore belonged to the most prestigious and powerful circle of people in the country. To posterity he is best known for his literary achievements; he translated both *Alexandreis* by Galterus de Castilone and *Gyðinga saga*, a compilation of Old Testament stories, and parts of the biblical translations in *Stjórn* have also been attributed to him.²

Brandr was born sometime after 1202 when his father was still married to his first wife and at which time the illegitimate Þórarinn was born.³ He was therefore somewhat younger than his two brothers and was probably earmarked for an ecclesiastical career at an early stage. His return to Iceland in 1232 was considered to be such a significant event that it is recorded in one of the annals.⁴ It is likely that he was returning from studies abroad but why his homecoming was attributed such significance is difficult to say. Nothing is heard of Brandr after his return until 1238 when he and his brother-in-law Ögmundur Helgason advised Brandr's brother Ormr to release Gizurr Þorvaldsson who had been betrayed by his enemy Sturla Sighvatsson and

¹ Tryggvi Þórhallsson 1923, Bull 1925

² *Gyðinga saga*, 101, Storm 1886, Widding 1960b, Einar Ó Sveinsson 1961, Kirby 1986 60-73, Wolf 1988, 1990

³ Sturl, 209

⁴ IA, 129

entrusted to Ormr's keeping. Qgmundr and Brandr seem to have met Ormr and his captive and Gizurr's friends who had come to ask for his release at the church-farm Skarð in Meðalland (VS) but although the source is unclear it does not seem that either Qgmundr or Brandr lived there. Qgmundr's father Digr-Helgi (d. 1235) had lived at Kirkjubær (VS), which had been a convent for a period around 1200 and was a *staðr* under the control of the bishops of Skálholt.¹ Qgmundr inherited control of Kirkjubær from his father and it is possible that Brandr served the church there, heading the small community of priests attached to this major ecclesiastical centre.²

The advice Brandr and Qgmundr gave Ormr seems to have been to cease his alliance with Sturla, a decision of potentially momentous significance. Instead of leaving the country as Sturla had intended, Gizurr mustered his forces after Ormr freed him and together with his ally Kolbeinn *ungi* put a stop to Sturla's power, killing him and his father at the battle of Orlygsstaðir later in the same year. Ormr did not accompany Sturla to the battle, thus saving his family from becoming entangled in the bitter conflict that followed. Had he supported Sturla the outcome of the battle might have been quite different, but it is likely that Brandr and Qgmundr had pointed out to him that there was no way he could support Sturla against both Gizurr and Kolbeinn *ungi* seeing that both were his first cousins³ and even if familial considerations did not weigh much (which they probably did) they will have advised him that he did not have much to gain from his support of Sturla and that combined Gizurr and Kolbeinn were probably a far stronger force than the divided Sturlungar.

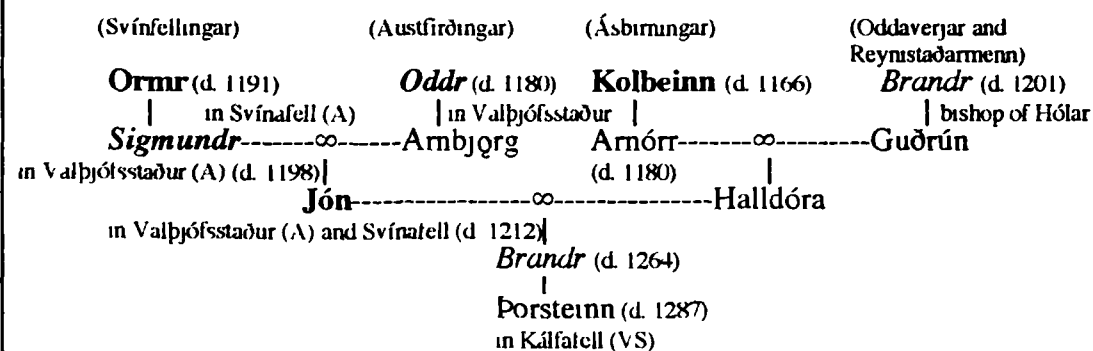
Four years later Gizurr and Kolbeinn were well on their way to exterminate the Sturlungar. In 1241 Gizurr had Sturla's uncle Snorri Sturluson killed and the following year saw Snorri's son Órækja on the defensive. Gizurr's ally Kolbeinn *ungi* - whose sister was married to Órækja - sent his brother-in-law Bǫðvarr Þórðarson in Bær (B) who was also Órækja's cousin and a traditional ally of the Sturlungar to offer Órækja peace talks. Despite warnings from Bǫðvarr, Órækja decided to attend but asked that Bishop Sigvarðr and Brandr Jónsson would also be present.⁴ Kolbeinn obliged him and both Brandr and Sigvarðr attended the meeting at the bridge over Hvítá (B). Brandr and Sigvarðr acted as intermediaries taking messages to and fro over the bridge and negotiating a settlement. Órækja agreed that the complex dispute would be submitted to the arbitration of Bishop Sigvarðr and Kolbeinn *ungi* and asked that they would either meet to shake hands in the middle of the bridge or that Brandr and Sigvarðr would carry the handshakes between them. Gizurr refused to meet on the bridge and the bishops asked Órækja to cross over to Gizurr's side. Órækja did and was

¹ DI I, 394-95

² In 1252 there were three priests living at Kirkjubær - Sturl. 563 and no doubt there were others of lesser ordinations.

³ Ormr's mother was Þora the elder, sister of Gizurr's mother Þora the younger.

⁴ Sturl. 451

Table 13. Abbot Brandr Jónsson's family

Brothers **Ormr** in Svínafell (A) (d. 1241), **Þórarinn** in Valþjófsstaður (A) (d. 1239)

Brothers-in-law **Ógmundur Helgason** in Kirkjubær (VS), **Skeggi Njálsson** in Skógar (R) (d. 1262)

Nephews **Sæmundr Ormsson** in Svínafell (A) (d. 1252) **Ormr Ormsson** (d. 1270), **Oddr Þórarinnsson** (d. 1255) **Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson** in Hof (A), Grund (E), Oddi (R), Keldur (R), Amarbæli (Á) (d. 1296)

Uncle **Kolbeinn kaldaljófs** in Staður in Reynines (Sk), Hólar (Sk) (d. 1246)

First cousins **Kolbeinn ungi** in Ás (Sk), Víðimýri (Sk), Flugumýri (Sk) (d. 1245) **Brandr Kolbeinnsson** in Staður in Reynines (Sk) (d. 1246)

Great uncles **Sigurðr Ormsson** in Svínafell (A) and Moðruvellir (E) (d. 1235), **Tetr Oddsson** in Hof (A) (d. 1223), **Tumi Kolbeinnsson** in Ás (Sk) (d. 1184), **Þorgeirr Brandsson** in Staður in Reynines (Sk) (d. 1186)

immediately arrested by Gizurr and Kolbeinn. Realising that Órækja had been deceived, Bishop Sigvarðr and Brandr became furious with Gizurr, accusing him of having betrayed them.¹

In this account in *Íslendinga saga* Brandr is called abbot, a title he did not receive until 1247. There is however no suggestion that Brandr was not present because the author, Sturla Þórðarson, was himself at the meeting and was captured there along with Órækja.² That Brandr - still a priest - was requested to attend these peace talks suggests that he had at an early stage begun to earn a reputation as an ecclesiastic dignitary in whom both sides could place their trust. It is of course possible that Órækja requested that Brandr be present because he was a first cousin of Kolbeinn *ungi* and would therefore deter his cousin from breaking faith. Órækja seems however to have trusted Kolbeinn completely, so the other explanation, that Brandr was already by this time considered as a priest who would stick his neck out for peace, is more likely.

Three years after the betrayal at Hvítá bridge fortunes had again turned; Sturla Sighvatsson's younger brother Þórðr *kakali* was on the offensive and a disease was killing Kolbeinn *ungi*.. Brandr accompanied Gizurr from the south to be at Kolbeinn's bedside when he divided his dominions and advised his first cousin Brandr Kolbeinnsson (also Kolbeinn's first cousin) to succeed to Kolbeinn's dominion in Skagafjörður and Húnaþing³ It is unlikely that maternal cousins were normally called upon to give counsel on family matters like these and although Brandr would not have been invited

¹ Sturl, 452-53

² The text here also refers to 'the bishops' which suggests that Brandr's later offices as abbot and bishop had got the compiler or a scribe confused - SturlR I, 572-73 (note 1 to ch. 157), SturlK I, 568 notes 3, 4

³ Sturl, 531

if he had not been close kin his presence will have been requested because of his status as a church dignitary.

In 1247 Brandr became abbot of the house of canons in Þykkvibær (VS). Þykkvibær was in the heartland of the Svínfellingar's domain and his appointment can therefore be seen as a strengthening of their hold over the region. His brother Ormr had died in 1241 and left the chieftaincy to his young son Sæmundr. Sæmundr was probably only a teenager when his father died - his younger brother Guðmundr was only seven years of age in 1241 - and their aunt's husband Ögmundr Helgason in Kirkjubær soon became influential in the region. In 1248 Sæmundr began to assert his authority and there followed a bitter struggle which ended when Ögmundr had the two brothers executed in 1252.¹ Brandr tried to mediate between his nephews and his brother-in-law at every stage of the dispute but although he gets a splendid compliment by the author - 'as always abbot Brandr was regarded as having achieved the best results'² - he was eventually unsuccessful. Both parties betrayed his confidence; Sæmundr prosecuted Ögmundr when Brandr had publicly made him agree not to and Ögmundr had the brothers killed when a truce had been established by Brandr. Executing the brothers was a desperate act which Ögmundr did not expect to profit from; he appointed Abbott Brandr and another brother-in-law, Skeggi Njálsson in Skógar, to decide the penalties and compensations. He heeded their verdict and was outlawed from the region.

While Brandr was unsuccessful in making his in-laws and relatives keep the peace in their own back-yard - and his reputation may have been dented as a result - the outcome was probably that his influence in the region increased. By this time Brandr had become officialis in the diocese of Skálholt while Bishop Sigvarðr was in Norway (1250-54) and it is symptomatic of the changing climate that after Ögmundr left Kirkjubær - a *staðr* which had been formally under the control of the bishops of Skálholt - Brandr appointed an otherwise unknown priest to head the household at Kirkjubær.³

In his capacity as a bishop's representative Brandr came to meet Gizurr Þorvaldsson, Þorgils *skarði* and Finnbjörn Helgason (Ögmundr's brother) at Gásir (E) in the summer of 1252 and was among the guests when Gizurr married Gróa Álfsdóttir in the autumn.⁴ Gróa and Gizurr had been living together at least since 1238⁵ but there

¹ This conflict is the subject of *Svínfellinga saga* - Sturl, 550-66

² [Þótt þá sem jafnan að Brandur ábóti hafði sér hinn besta hlut af deildan] - Sturl, 553

³ Sturl, 566. The priest's name was Arnorr *skull*. The name was common among the Ásbíringar - Brandr's maternal kin - and a brother of Ögmundr in Kirkjubær was Arnorr abbot of Viðey 1247-49. The name is otherwise not common (NID, 53, NIDs, 37-38) and this suggests that Brandr had selected someone, either related to himself or to the previous householders in Kirkjubær. This Arnorr was soon superseded by Grímr Hólmsteinsson - ÁB, 5-6

⁴ Sturl, 568

⁵ Sturl, 422

had apparently been an impediment to their marriage. It seems that Gizurr had acquired an exemption from the archbishop and Brandr's attendance at the wedding seems to have symbolised the consent of the Icelandic clergy. The fact that Brandr rode all the way to Gásir to meet Gizurr may only mean that he was expecting important letters from Norway which he wanted to receive in person but it is more likely that this was Brandr the politician who wanted to be at the side of the chieftains returning to Iceland with the king's grace.

This interpretation is supported by a letter Abbot Brandr sent to Bishop Heinrekr later in the autumn of 1252. The letter is only summarised in our source but its contents were that Brandr had appointed Þorgils *skarði* to arbitrate with Gizurr Þorvaldsson on the killing of Sæmundr and Guðmundr; a plea to Bishop Heinrekr to be more calm and peaceful and finally a warning that Hrafn Oddsson and Sturla Þórðarson were real enemies of Þorgils *skarði*.¹ Another reason for Brandr's concern for Þorgils is that they were related. Þorgils's mother was a first cousin of Brandr.

It is not clear how this arbitration of Þorgils's and Gizurr's connects with the one which Brandr and Skeggi Njálsson had carried out.² Otherwise it is clear from this letter that Brandr was supporting the cause of King Hákon; Bishop Heinrekr seems to have had an uncompromising and confrontational character and had probably begun to administer with immoderate zeal; and Brandr will have been warning him that overbearing behaviour might damage both his plans of ecclesiastical reforms as well as their common political cause. Hrafn Oddsson and Sturla Þórðarson had been left to look after Þórðr *kakalí*'s domain when he left for Norway in 1250 and were not at all happy with the new arrangements where Gizurr, Finnbjörn and Þorgils accepted parts of Þórðr's domain from the king. In particular they objected to Þorgils's appointment to Borgarfjorður which came under their sphere of influence. As Brandr saw reason to warn Þorgils of his uncle Sturla's lack of friendship and Hrafn's enmity this suggests that Brandr together with Bishop Heinrekr actively supported the new royal appointees, and Brandr's ride north to Gásir therefore becomes perfectly understandable.

In January 1253 Bishop Heinrekr suddenly turned soft and arranged a peace meeting between himself - on Þorgils's behalf - and Sturla and Hrafn. The meeting was set in Borgarfjorður and Bishop Heinrekr sent word to Skálholt to Brandr to attend. Brandr arrived when the talks had started and the author describes their joyful reunion. Brandr seems to have taken the lead in the discussions and exhorted Hrafn and Sturla to give up Borgarfjorður to which Þorgils had been appointed by the king but they refused and the talks ended in confusion. Afterwards bishop and abbot rode together to Reykholt where they sang mass together and Brandr preached the sermon. In it Brandr discussed Bishop Heinrekr's excommunication of Þórðr and Hrafn. Brandr gave his

¹ Sturl, 592

² On this confusion see SturlR II, xlv

support to the excommunication but explained that they would be absolved if they agreed to a reasonable settlement (i.e. gave up Borgarfjorður).¹

Soon after this Þorgils left Hólar where he had been staying with Bishop Heinrekr and accepted Abbot Brandr's invitation to come and stay in Skálholt. Þorgils stayed there until May 1253 when he - despite Brandr's warnings - left for his patrimony in Snæfellsnes. On leaving Brandr gave him an ox and a quilt. In the meantime Brandr had attended a peace meeting concerning the killings of Sæmundr and Guðmundr but it is not known what happened there and Þorgils was not present to arbitrate.²

When Þorgils had established himself at Staðarstaður (SD) he raided the household of the deacon Halldórr Vílmundarson at Ytri Rauðimelur (B) who was an informant of Hrafn's. Halldórr complained to Guðmundr who was in charge of the house of canons at Helgafell which had not had an abbot since 1244.³ Guðmundr sent one of his canons to Þorgils asking him to return the loot and threatened to excommunicate him and others who consumed the meat; the resident priest at Staðarstaður had refused to eat the meat of the livestock stolen from Halldórr and so had other clerics as soon as the deed was done. Þorgils refused to return the loot and Halldórr then turned to Hrafn for help. Hrafn took Halldórr and his household on and promised to take care of the matter. It does not seem however that he was very active because Halldórr left for Kolbeinsstaðir (B) where he sought the advice of Ketill the priest and his son-in-law Narfi Snorrason. They advised him to seek out Abbot Brandr and enlist his help. Brandr was not entirely sympathetic to Halldórr but nevertheless wrote a letter to Þorgils asking him to return the loot. Brandr also sent word to Ketill the priest in Kolbeinsstaðir to accompany Halldórr to Staðarstaður. Þorgils now agreed to return the loot but insisted on deciding alone on the dispute between them. Ketill seems to have mediated successfully because in the end Þorgils gave Halldórr clerical vestments and Halldórr gave Þorgils an ox and three wethers and they parted friends.⁴

Later the same year Þorgils made an assault in Borgarfjorður and executed Valgarðr son of Þorkell priest in Síðumúli (B). After he had returned home to Staðarstaður Brandr sent him word that he should go to Bishop Heinrekr at Hólar to get absolution, it seems that Brandr did not think himself qualified to absolve such a crime.⁵

The following autumn things were beginning to look more promising; Sturla and Þorgils had sealed their friendship and Sturla had promised to marry his daughter to

¹ Sturl. 611-14

² Sturl. 614-16

³ It is possible that this Guðmundr was the same priest as Guðmundr Ólafsson in Miklaholt (B) - Sturl. 6, 481, 716-18, 728-29, 1A, 133, 330

⁴ Sturl. 617-18

⁵ Sturl. 645

Gizurr's son. At a peace meeting at Breiðabólstaður in Vesturhóp (H), Hrafn and Gizurr agreed to appoint Abbot Brandr as an arbitrator in their dispute while Gizurr and Sturla decided to settle their dispute between themselves, appointing Hrafn as arbitrator where they failed to agree.¹

Things turned sour again with the burning of the wedding party at Flugumýri (Sk) in October 1253. Bishop Sigvarðr returned to Iceland in 1254 and now we hear nothing of Abbot Brandr until July 1255 when he attended a meeting between Þorgils *skarði*, Brandr's nephew Þorvarðr Þórarinsson and Sturla Þórðarson in Borgarfjorður. Þorvarðr had come to ask Þorgils to join him in seeking revenge for the killing of his brother Oddr in January of the same year. Oddr, who was trying to establish himself as overlord of Skagafjorður, had in a fit of abject stupidity taken Bishop Heinrekr and held him captive for a few days in 1254 and was as a result killed by Hrafn Oddsson and Eyjólfur *ofsi*, the bishop's closest allies. Brandr had at first been unhappy with Þorgils for having rattled swords at Bær a fortnight earlier. Þoðvarr in Bær (B) was married to Herdís Arnórsdóttir, a cousin of Brandr's. The abbot was however reassured it seems and when Þorgils asked his advice on Þorvarðr's boon he replied that he would not encourage anyone to wage war on other regions

But you and Þorvarðr should not think that I am not vexed because of the killing of my relative Oddr where he was put away in rubble like a fox or a thief but it is forbidden for me to have any part in plans of vengeance or any kinds of violence. But it is better for you not to be alone if you think it is likely that you will not be inactive.²

Þorgils then said that he would like to have Skagafjorður and Húnaþing if he joined Þorvarðr and they got any sort of result. Brandr retorted:

I can much better suffer you Þorgils to enjoy Skagafjorður, our birthright, rather than those who now hold it. But I do not want to encourage you to go because I do not think it is for the taking.³

And the author of *Þorgils saga* continues: 'The abbot then sprang to his feet and asked that God's will be done. Some men said then that he became excited because he was red as blood and said this when he walked away':

It is hard that we should endure that our noble relatives are left unatoned on account of farmers' sons and so would my brother Ormr think if he lived.⁴

¹ Sturl, 628

² [En eigi skal Þorvarður það ætla og eigi þú að eigi torþykki mér það í drápi Odds frænda míns þar sem hann var kasaður í urð sem melrakkir eða þjotur en mér er það bannað að eiga nokkurn hlut í mannaðum eða nokkurs kyns ófriði. En það er þer eigi verra að vera eigi einum saman ef þer þykir þess von að þú munir eigi um kyrrt sitja.] - Sturl, 687

³ [Betur ynni eg þer Þorgils að njóta Skagafjarðar, ættleifðar vorrar, en þeim sem að nu hala. En eigi vil eg lýsa þig ferðar því að mér þykir eigi laust fyrir liggja.] - Sturl, 687

⁴ [Spratt áboti þa upp og bað að verða skyldi guðs vilji. Mæltu þá sumir menn að honum hlýpti kapp í kinn því að hann var dreyrtaudur að sjá og mæltu þetta er hann gekk í brottu. „Hart er það að vér skulum bera frændur vora gofga bótalesa fyrir bóndasonum og svo myndi þykja Ormi bróð- [688] ur mínum ef hann lifði.“] - Sturl, 687-88

Brandr having made his dramatic exit Þorgils and Þorvarðr came to an agreement and decided to attack Hrafn and Eyjólfur ofsi. When Brandr was told of the deal he had cooled somewhat and said now that he would not support it and strongly advised them not to go:

Many innocent men will be harmed in this expedition so it is improper that I give my consent and it may be that I am so incensed with some men that I will not be able to pick all my words as carefully as I should if I say much about it ¹

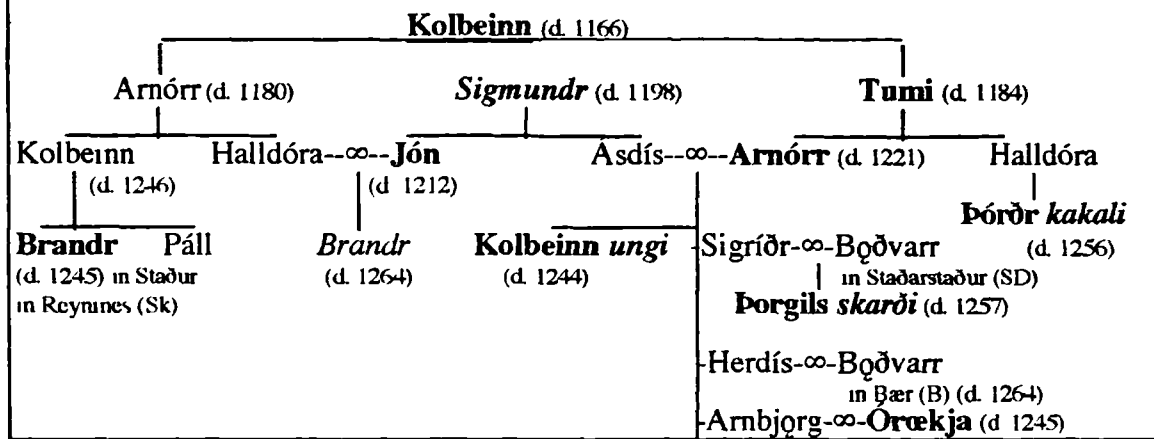
Þorvarðr and Þorgils nevertheless shook hands and parted the same day. Brandr intended to meet Þorgils again the following day but missed him. On realising that he would not meet Þorgils Brandr said to Þorgils's brother-in-law Þórðr *Hítnesingr*:

I will not ride any further [to seek Þorgils] because I can see how this will develop. At our meeting yesterday evening I thought this expedition was a folly. But it always comes to pass which is preordained and there is hope that it will not be totally irresponsible. But it seems to me that your host is small and badly equipped but not unsightly and not visibly fair. Bear my relative Þorgils my greetings and implore him to do as little wrong as possible to innocent men. It is important to me what news I get of him and I will be very worried about this expedition until I hear how you fare. You, in-law, I ask to follow Þorgils diligently and urge him to do good. I pray that God will be your weapon and shield and Archbishop Thomas your protector. But do not trust in Þorvarðr's honour because I am not of one mind about how the partnership of Þorgils and Þorvarðr will end and suspect that Þorvarðr will break the pact ²

Þórðr *Hítnesingr* - whose wife was a daughter of Brandr's first cousin Sigríðr and therefore his in-law - was probably himself the author of *Þorgils saga skarða* so there cannot be a better source for these speeches although they have no doubt been polished by the author. It appears that Brandr wanted Þorgils to succeed to Skagafjörður, no doubt because in Þórðr *kakali*'s absence Þorgils was the only chieftain descended from the Ásbirningar and Brandr seems to have considered it important that the region stayed in the hands of the family. Gizurr Þorvaldsson had been appointed to Skagafjörður by the king and he had put Oddr there in his place when he left for Norway in 1254. As Gizurr was not there to take care of things it was arguably up to Oddr's friends and relatives to avenge him and rid Skagafjörður of his killers. Although Bishop Heinrekr

¹ [Mun hér morgum manni saklausum vera misgert í þessu ferð svo að ósæmilegt er að eg leggi þar samþykki til og má [689] vera að mér kenni heiltar um suma menn svo að eg láti eigi allra orða gætt sem skyldi ef eg tala margt til] - Sturl. 688-89

² [Eigi mun eg ríða lengra því að eg sé hversu að þetta fer. Í gærkvöld á fundi vorum þótti mér óráð að fara ferð þessa. En æ dregst fram jalnan það sem týnr er ætlað og er þess von að eigi verði með öllu abyrgðarlaust. En mér synist líð yðvart lítuð og illa buið en eigi allobragðlegt og eigi allterglegt. Skaltu nú bera Þorgils í frænda mínum kveðju mína og bið að hann geri sem minnst rangt jalnan saklausum monnum. Þykir mér nu allmiklu skipta [690] hvað eg spyrði til hans og mjög mun eg vera áhyggjusamur um ferð þessa þar til eg spyr hvernig yður tekst. Vildi eg magur að þu fylgdir Þorgils vel og fystir hann jalnan hins betra. Vildi eg nú að guð væn yður týnr vopn og vorð og hyljanarmaður Tómas erkibiskup. En treystuð lítt á drengskap Þorvarðs því að mer segir eigi mjög hugur um hversu til enda ganga skipti þeirra Þorgils og Þorvarðs og ætla eg Þorvarðr valdi afbrigðum] - Sturl. 689-90

Table 14. Bishop Brandr's relations with the Ásbirningar

had decided that the king's cause was best served by Oddr's killers Hrafn and Eyjólfur *ofsi* - and Brandr seems to have been following that line late in the summer of 1254 when he refused to speak to Oddr at a wedding¹ - their killing of Oddr was demonstrably an attack on the king. Although open support of the enemies of Bishop Heinrekr would have been awkward for Brandr it is clear that the situation was very advantageous to him; an alliance between Þorgils and Þorvarðr meant that there was a good chance that Oddr would be avenged, that an Ásbirningr would again rule Skagafjörður and that all this could be accomplished in the name of the king. As it was, Brandr could not have got a better result; Þorgils and Þorvarðr were victorious at the battle at Þveráreyrar 19 July 1255 and killed Eyjólfur *ofsi*. Soon afterwards Þorgils became overlord of Skagafjörður and made peace with both Bishop Heinrekr and Hrafn Oddsson.

Brandr's warning of Þorvarðr's deceitful nature is probably made up in the light of later developments; two years later Þorvarðr surprised Þorgils at Grund (E) and had him executed. As that was however a rather foolish act in terms of political expediency - in many ways reminiscent of Oddr's capture of Bishop Heinrekr - it may be that Brandr simply knew that his nephews were not the brightest of men and he may well have shared his reservations about his nephew's character with Þórðr.

Regarding Brandr's behaviour, it is possible that he had simply lost his temper at the evening of the meeting and was then genuinely retracting from his first words, words which could only be interpreted as advice to wage war on Hrafn and Eyjólfur *ofsi*, and therefore indirectly on Bishop Heinrekr. It may however also have been a cunning show to satisfy Brandr's thirst for revenge and his desire to see a kinsman once more ruling Skagafjörður without staining his ecclesiastical image. What is interesting is the lengths to which he went to preserve this image. In his shoes most would probably not have hesitated in being openly supportive; Brandr was the only surviving male of his

¹ Sturl, 656

generation of the Svínfellingar as well as one of only three surviving males of the Ásbirningar¹ It is clear that he took his membership of the Ásbirningar seriously, claiming Skagafjorður as his birthright (*ættleifð* lit. ancestral bequest). That Brandr chose to emphasise his ecclesiastical identity speaks volumes about the changing social conditions of high placed clergy

In 1252 Aron Hjörleifsson returned to Iceland having spent years in exile in Norway and made peace with the sons of Sigmundur *snagi* whom he had killed in 1225. According to the 14th century *Arons saga* this peace was made in 1254 and the settlement arbitrated by Bishop Heinrekr and Abbot Brandr.² According to *Þorgils saga skarða* however it was King Hákon who made peace between Aron and Sigmundur's son Erlingr and the two of them returned together to Iceland in 1252.³ The two accounts are not incompatible, Erlingr and Aron could have made their peace in Norway and Heinrekr and Brandr then arbitrated between him and Sigmundur's other sons. There is however no evidence to corroborate *Arons saga's* claim that Sigmundur had had more than one son and it is possible that the author made this up, although his motive in so doing is not transparent.

Around Easter 1258 Sturla Þórðarson and Þorgils *skarði's* brother Sighvatr were hunting for Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson in Eyjafjorður because he had killed Þorgils the previous autumn. Þorvarðr slipped away into Þingeyjarþing and sent a priest to ask for a settlement. They agreed and a meeting was held at Gásir (E) in the presence of Abbot Eyjólfur Valla-Brandsson of Þverá. A deal was made whereby a panel of judges was to adjudicate on the matter. The panel was to be made up of equally many men from each side but Abbot Brandr was to preside. This panel never convened and Þorvarðr was prosecuted and convicted at the Alþing of 1259.⁴

In 1262 Brandr was at the Alþing in the company of Bishop Sigvarðr and witnessed Hrafn Oddsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson - now earl of Iceland - shake hands on their reconciliation.⁵ This same summer Archbishop Einarr sent a message to Iceland and summoned Brandr to Norway. He stayed with the archbishop over the winter and in Lent the chapter at Niðarós agreed that Brandr should be consecrated bishop of Hólar. He was consecrated 9 March 1263 and returned to Iceland in the same year.⁶ Both *Árna saga* and *Íslendinga saga* agree that it was Archbishop Einarr who summoned Brandr to Norway, but one of the annals, *Høyers annáll*, claims that Brandr

¹ Þorðr *kakali* (son of Halldora Tumadóttir, Brandr's mother's first cousin) was in Norway and died in 1256. The other one was Brandr's first cousin Pall Kolbeinsson in Staður in Reynines (Sk). He was still alive in 1259 - Sturl. 743

² SturlR II 269-278

³ Sturl. 627

⁴ Sturl., 741-42, 743

⁵ Sturl. 751, 758

⁶ Sturl., 759 AB 7

was chosen in 1262 apparently before he left for Norway.¹ It is impossible to verify this claim and safer to trust the agreement of all the other sources.

Brandr was bishop only a little more than a year. He died on 26 May 1264. His influence did however last much longer; the great reforming bishops Árni Þorláksson in Skálholt (1269-98) and Jörundr Þorsteinsson in Hólar (1267-1313) had been his pupils at Þykkvibær, as had Árni's deputy abbot Rúnólfur Sigmundarson in Þykkvibær (1264-1307).² It was in the episcopacies of Árni and Jörundr that the church won control over most church property and can truly be said to have become an independent institution.

Brandr did however leave more than successful pupils; he had a son called Þorsteinn who was a householder at the church-farm Kálfafell in Fljótshverfi (VS) in Árni Þorláksson's youth,³ no doubt as a result of his father's influence in the region. Sæmundr Ormsson (d. 1252) had lived at Kálfafell before he moved to Svínafell which suggests that it was owned by the family and also that it was a particularly important estate where leaders of the men of Fljótshverfi would live.

It is clear that Brandr quickly earned a reputation as a model cleric. The author of *Svínfellinga saga* - written shortly before 1300⁴ - describes him as an 'excellent chieftain, good cleric, wise and popular, influential and benevolent. In that time [ca. 1247] he had the best fortune of all those who were then in Iceland.'⁵ We have also seen how the same author described Brandr as always having achieved the best results in public affairs. Not only was Brandr eminently respectable but he also managed to project an image of himself as a conciliator. His excellent pedigree was no doubt a precondition for his success but his dedication to his ecclesiastical identity was the basis for his becoming a required presence at almost every peace meeting. Brandr was not always neutral and he clearly had his own agenda and views, but he never allowed such considerations to take over. The drama of his agitation at the meeting of Þorgils and Þorvarðr in 1254 arises from the sympathy the audience must surely have for this benevolent and respectable cleric who is allowed no outlet for his frustration over the killing of a kinsman and over ancestral territory in the hands of enemies. It is the restrictions clerics imposed on their behaviour which made them special and which made high clerics able to intervene in conflict with safety and a chance of success.

The clergy did not of course have a monopoly on conciliation. There were in all periods laymen who were successfully involved in mediation and were sought after as arbitrators. The difference between the two and the reason clerics began to have the advantage over secular conciliators in the 13th century was that whereas the latter

¹ IA, 67

² AB, 6

³ AB, 6 Árni was born in 1237 and this was probably in the years after 1256

⁴ SturlR II, xlvi, ÍSB I, 315

⁵ [Ágætur höfðingi, klerkur goður, vitur og vinsæll, ríkur og goðgjarn. Og í þann tíma hafði hann mest mannhcill þeirra manna er þá voru á Íslandi.] - Sturl, 550

depended on their personality, skill and reputation the clerics were ready made, so to speak, on account of their ordination. As the 13th century wore on it slowly became established that clerics were, in the nature of their ordination, benevolent and trustworthy. Even if they as individuals were not particularly trustworthy it became seen as a function of their ordination to be so.

III 5.5.3 *Clerical celibacy*

It is a historiographical misconception of long standing that clerical celibacy really never was properly accepted in Iceland.¹ The facts in the matter are however unusually clear and have been so at least since Jón Jóhannesson dealt with the issue in 1956.² There are absolutely no indications that anyone agitated for clerical celibacy in Iceland until the 1240s. Then the policy seems to have been pursued forcefully and successfully so that deacons and subdeacons had become the primary targets by the 1260s and 1270s. Marriage is forbidden to clerics in the New Christian Law section of 1275³ and there are no indications that priests at least got married after that date. As elsewhere clerics had concubines and fathered children but that does not mean that the policy had not been successful. While in theory the ideal of sexual abstinence was the basis of the policy of clerical celibacy, its effective aim was to cut the formal ties between priest and his land and his family. Such ties were of course never completely severed but by the second half of the 13th century they had become of secondary importance to the majority of priests. Their inability to marry set them apart from secular society and made them more dependent on the institutions of the church.

There are signs of embarrassment in *Jóns saga helga* about St Jón's marriages. Stephan Kuttner has shown that the saga's claim that St Jón went to Rome before his consecration to get dispensation on account of his marriages⁴ is anachronistic and could at the earliest fit conditions around 1200.⁵ Gunnlaugr Leifsson wrote the first version of the saga in the first years of the 13th century and the embarrassment may well have been his. If it was him it does not mean that he believed in celibacy for all clergy; as a monastic no doubt familiar with foreign hagiographic material he will have considered that his saint would have better prospects if he had settled his marriage affairs with the pope. Both principal versions of the saga have this account but as they are both of 14th century date it cannot be precluded that the trip to Rome, or the reason for it, was an addition to Gunnlaugr's original account.

¹ Gunnes 1982: 20, cf. Jochens 1980: 382-83, 388-89, Magnús Stefánsson 1978: 147-48

² Jón Jóhannesson 1956: 256-58. Cf. Gallen 1957d.

³ NgL V, 38

⁴ Bk I, 160-61 (232-33)

⁵ Kuttner 1975

As far as is known not all bishops of the 12th century were married. Þorlákr Rúnólfsson of Skálholt (1118-33); Magnús Einarsson of Skálholt (1134-48) and Björn Gilsson of Hólar (1147-62) are not known to have been married and no descendants of theirs have been identified. It is known that Klængur Þorsteinsson of Skálholt was not married but he had a daughter by his second cousin, the 12th century's *femme fatale*, Yngvildr Þorgílsdóttir.¹ St Þorlákr likewise was not married and in his case at least it can be ascribed to his monastic ideals; having gone to woo a respectable widow, he had a dream where he was told that another and more elevated bride was intended for him. Shortly afterwards he became abbot of Þykkvibær. The author of *Þorláks saga* introduces his account of the wooing:

But God's Christendom has for a long time prospered and become stronger and the predicament of clerics increased, on account of decrees, because in that time it was not of great concern to the superiors if priests got married to widows, but now it is forbidden.²

Þorláks saga is considered to be written early in the 13th century³ and this is evidence that the so-called *Canones Nidarosiensis* were taken to hold for Iceland. In canon 6 priests are forbidden to marry women who have been married earlier. In the *Canones* only canons in cathedral chapters are forbidden to marry and/or keep concubines whereas priests are instructed not to divorce their wives. The furthest the *Canones* go towards clerical celibacy is to require married clerics who are ordained as priests to take a vow of abstinence.⁴ While the dating of the composition of the *Canones* in the form they have survived is disputed⁵ it is likely that they were derived in essence from Cardinal Nicholas Breakspear's (Pope Hadrian IV) visit to Norway in 1152-53 and his establishment of the archdiocese of Niðarós.⁶ The *Canones* therefore reflect what a reforming prelate could realistically hope to achieve in the far north at that time. Nicholas is accredited with having forbidden *bigamam in clero* and it is likely that the *Canones* are an elaboration of this edict.⁷ Although *Þorláks saga* is evidence that these regulations were known there are no other indications that emphasis was laid on their enforcement either in Norway or Iceland.

There is at any rate not a breath on marital restrictions of the clergy in any of the letters of the archbishops in the late 12th century. Nor does it appear that St Þorlákr - concerned as he was with marital reform in general - campaigned for marital reform among his clergy. Neither does Guðmundr Arason, who was himself no doubt celibate,

¹ Sturl, 51, 57, 60-61, 101, 182, Einar Arnórsson 1949-53 177-78

² [En guðs kristni hefir lengi eflzt ok magnazt ok vaxit vandi lærðra manna, fyrir boðorða sakir, af því at þa var eigi um þat mjök vandat al yfirboðum, þott prestar fengi ekkna, en nú er þat lynrboðit] - Bsk I, 93 (267-68)

³ [SB I, 474

⁴ Lat.dok, 46-48

⁵ For references concerning the debate on the *Canones* see ch III 3 4

⁶ See Kolsrud 1940-43, 1958 198-200, Johnsen 1945a, 1951a, 1967, Skánland 1968

⁷ Lat dok, 94-96 Gunnes 1982 23-24

seem to have advocated any such thing, in fact he is supposed to have found a wife for one of the priests he himself had ordained.¹ It does not seem to have been a problem for Bishop Páll Jónsson of Skálholt (1195-1211) or his successor Magnús Gizurarson (1216-37) that they were married. In *Páls saga* Páll's wife Herdís is complemented for her brilliant management of the bishop's household:

Bishop Pall had been one winter at Skálholt when Herdís, his wife, came there to manage the household and she was such a pillar of strength to him and the see that there was no one like her while he was bishop. Such was her energy and supervision that she had only been a few winters there when there was everywhere plenty of the things needed and no things had to be asked for for the household even if there were 100 people to feed and 70 or 80 belonging to the household.²

This author writing in the second decade of the 13th century³ was clearly in no doubt about the beneficial aspects of bishops being married. It seems to have been about this time or shortly afterwards that elements in the Norwegian church began to call for the introduction of clerical celibacy. Their progress will however have been obstructed by the frequent changes in occupancy of the archbishopric. It was not until a synod was held in 1236 that the issue surfaces. At this synod the priests claimed that Cardinal Nicholas had permitted clerical marriage but could not produce any evidence to support this. They were of course right in a sense; if the *Canones* are his edicts he condoned clerical marriage by not forbidding it outright. Archbishop Sigurðr who seems to have raised the matter obtained a papal letter in 1237 where Pope Gregory IX instructs him to see to it that his clerics do not marry.⁴ From then on clerical celibacy was official church policy in the archdiocese of Niðarós.⁵

Bishop Sigvarðr of Skálholt (1238-68) and Bishop Heinrekr of Hólar (1247-60) and Bishop Brandr Jónsson of Hólar (1263-64) all campaigned against clerical marriages.⁶ In 1252 Bishop Heinrekr became furious when he learned that the priest Gunnlaugr Hallfreðarson, who was Þorgils *skarði's* brother-in-law and in the latter's company at Hólar, was married. Heinrekr forbade Gunnlaugr to attend church but relented when Þorgils asked his forbearance.⁷ We do not know much about the bishops' progress but it appears to have been satisfactory. When Árni Þorláksson was official in Hólar between Bishop Brandr's death in 1264 and Bishop Jörundr's return

¹ Bsk I, 589-90

² [Páll biskup hafði einn vetr setið í Skalaholti, áðr Herdís, kona hans, kom þangat til umsyslu fyrir innan stökk, ok var sva mikil stöð ok styrkr at, bæði staðnum ok honum sjalltum, sem engi varð onnur slík at monnum meðan hann var at stöli. Sva var skorúngskapr hennar mikill og umsýsla, at hon hafði fa vetr þar verið, áðr þar var hvervetna ænti nog, þat er hafa þurfti, ok einiskis þurfti í þu [132] at biðja, þettu manna væn a búit, en l \ \ eðr l \ \ \ heimamanna.] - Bsk I, 131-32

³ [BS I 348

⁴ DI I 518

⁵ On its acceptance in Norway see Gunnes 1982: 241

⁶ AB 9:37

⁷ Sturl, 606

in 1267 he successfully prevented the marriage of a wealthy deacon who had the endorsement of Earl Gizurr.¹ In 1273 when Árni had himself become bishop he turned on the subdeacon Egill Sölmundarson householder in Reykholt (B) and chieftain of the Sturlungar (d. 1297). Egill, who must have been past middle age at this time, had been married to Þórunn Einarisdóttir in the episcopacy of Bishop Sigvarðr despite the bishop's denunciation. Egill and Þórunn had several children and were not at all happy to have their marriage annulled but Árni persisted, threatening excommunication and anathema and in the end they relented and Þórunn was married to another man.²

It is likely that Bishop Árni targeted important men like Egill and the deacon to set an example, but the fact that these were men in lower ordinations, who were possibly not even active as clerics at all, suggests that the fight to make priests celibate was to all intents and purposes over by this time. It is difficult to corroborate this with other evidence but there are no examples of clerics who came of age in or after 1240 being married and this suggests that the shift to clerical celibacy was relatively swift in Iceland.

By 1300 clerical marriage had become the stuff of myth. The middle version of *Guðmundar saga* contains two stories of priests ordained by Bishop Guðmundr. Both got married 'but then there came here the edict that no priest should have a wife and that those who were married previously should divorce their wives or lose their office, and then their children would be called legitimate.'³ Bishop Guðmundr had prophesied as much and he had also told both these priests that neither of them would lose their office on account of their marriages. In the case of Narfi Snorrason (d. 1284) in Kolbeinsstaðir (B) he sought out the archbishop and got a dispensation from him and continued to live with his wife and never lost his office. Or that at least was what Narfi's son Þorlákr (d. 1303) told the author of the version.⁴ In the case of the incredibly long-lived Einarr *klerkr* Ásbjarnarson in Einarsstaðir (B) (b. 1190 d. 1305!) his keeping of both wife and office was simply a miracle due to Bishop Guðmundr.⁵

That the marriages of priests had become material for miracle stories around 1300 suggests that they were then a thing of the past.

It is probably no coincidence that the Norwegian archbishops took up the issue of clerical celibacy in the late 1230s and that it became an effective policy in Iceland in the 1240s to 1270s. It is in this period that in both countries the church really begins to

¹ AB, 8-10

² AB, 37-38

³ [en síþan kvomu út þau bœðorð, at eingi prestur skyldi ser konu eiga, en þeir er áðr vóru kvángaðir skyldu skilja við sínar konur, ella lata messusonginn, ok skyldi þá heita skilgetin börn þeirra] - Bsk I, 597

⁴ Bsk I, 596-97

⁵ Bsk I, 589-90

assert itself as an independent institution. Clerical celibacy was being pursued in the same period as the church was strengthening its image as conciliator and both aspects relate to its aim of separation from secular society. This was not however an original aim of the native clergy, but an adopted one. The reasons why it was adopted and why clerics began to impose restrictions on their behaviour in the 13th century are complex.

A precondition was the increasing amount of property under direct control of churchmen. Another factor was that by the late 12th century most high-born clerics - those who became bishops and abbots - were younger and illegitimate sons with no other prospect of advancement in the world. It was to their benefit to identify with the church and to strengthen it as an institution both by ensuring that more property came under its control and by extending its formal powers. A third important factor was the development of secular politics. As chieftains became increasingly powerful and their numbers decreased their actions became better aimed and their retinues began to consist of professional retainers. In short politics became a specialised full time occupation of a small number of people. To these it was advantageous to have at their disposal clerics with particular skills and well defined qualities which could be used in certain situations. It was also advantageous to this new type of lord to have access to the church's muscle in conciliation. To aristocratic families the church was also useful because it offered opportunities for their surplus sons which might otherwise become a nuisance and pose a threat to their older brothers. Each of these factors was a function of another and together they created the conditions for an institutional church.

This of course holds mainly for the high-born clergy. We know very little of the rank and file district priests but it is likely that they followed the leadership of the church and believed that they would be better off as members of an independent and separate church

IV DISCUSSION

IV 1. Power and religion

It is a notion of long standing in Icelandic historiography that in pre-Christian times the *godar* or chieftains based their powers partly on having religious functions like hallowing assemblies, running pagan temples and presiding over religious ceremonies and feasts.¹ In light of the close links between chieftains and the church in the 12th century explored in this work (ch. III 5.2 in particular), it is interesting to explore this idea of pagan chieftain-priests, how it has come about and how strong the arguments for it are.

The argument for the religious function of the *godar* is based on two ideas. On the one hand the term *godi* is clearly cognate with *god* (=deity) and *gud* (=god) which suggests that the bearers of such a distinction had some kind of association with religion. The term *godi* was only in general use for chieftains in Iceland, which might suggest that the religious link was special to Icelandic society. It is however also found in three 10th century Danish runic inscriptions² and it may be that Iceland was simply the only region where the term survived into the 12th and 13th centuries. While there is no reason to reject that the term was originally coined because of an association with religion it does not of course mean that the men who called themselves *godar* in Iceland in the 10th century had any formal religious functions.

On the other hand the medieval literature clearly indicates that the running of temples was one of the functions of chieftains in the 10th century.

In 1847 the Norwegian historian Rudolf Keyser published the first comprehensive study on Nordic heathendom.³ Keyser's discussion of sacred buildings can be considered as a reaction to the chapter on temples in Jakob Grimm's monumental *Deutsche Mythologie* which had appeared in 1835 and where he had found that the Southern Germanic peoples at least, had mainly practised their cult outdoors, especially in groves, concluding that *Tempel ist also zugleich Wald*.⁴ Keyser found that the

¹ It is arguable that many Icelandic 13th century authors ascribed to this idea. Arngrímur Jonæ 1951 55-59, Maurer 1874a. 38-45, Bogi Melsted 1903-30 I, 291-99, Sigurður Nordal 1942 201 cf 107, Jón Jóhannesson 1956 72-73, Jakob Benediktsson 1974a 172-73, Björn Þorsteinsson 1978 51; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1985, Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1986-87 I, 150-59, Byock 1990: 59. On *eigen-tempel* see Stutz 1948 44-45, 1895 8911, 1937, Chaney 1970 73-74. For an early criticism see Boden 1905.

² Danmarks runeindskrifter, 225, 228, 252. Possibly also on the Karlevi stone in Öland, Sweden - Danmarks runeindskrifter, 474.

³ Keyser 1847 esp 89-97.

⁴ Grimm 1875-78 I, 53-71. The cited words are on p 55.

Northern Germanic peoples had been much more organised, and had had proper temples in which they practised their various cultic ceremonies. He based his findings not only on Adam of Bremen's famous description of the temple in Old Uppsala,¹ but also on the Icelandic sagas which he found to be a gold-mine in this respect, giving detailed descriptions of temples and all manner of cultic practices.

Keyser laid the foundation for a whole new field of research and in the century that followed the publication of his work, a large number of Viking age scholars concentrated their efforts on reconstructing pagan religious organisation, explaining pagan cult practices and the pagan world view. More and more bits of evidence were continuously being added to Keyser's compilation, mostly from the study of skaldic verse on the one hand and from archaeological investigations in Iceland on the other. Industrious antiquarians had by the beginning of this century managed to identify more than 100 temple sites in Iceland, and among them raged a fierce debate as to typological distinctions between these structures and the specific cultic ceremonies the different types implied.²

The importance of this research for Scandinavian historiography was tremendous, but even more importantly it contributed a great deal to the growing of nationalism and national pride, especially in Iceland and Norway, which were both in the process of gaining independence in the late 19th century. In the 1930s a movement among philologists began to stress the artistic qualities of the Icelandic sagas, and at the same time question their reliability as historical sources. By the 1960's a general agreement had been established among Scandinavian medievalists that the Icelandic sagas, especially the Sagas of Icelanders which describe events in Iceland in the 10th century, were to all intents and purposes 13th century fiction. As these sagas constituted the principal evidence for the earlier ideas about pagan society, the pagan past suddenly evaporated. Archaeologists followed suit and found that most of the ruins which had been identified as temples were indeed something much more mundane.

In 1966 Olaf Olsen published his dissertation *Hørg, hov og kirke* in which he critically examined all the evidence which was then still thought to have a bearing on Nordic paganism. His conclusion was that none of the medieval Nordic literature on temples and pagan religious practices was based on genuine knowledge of the pagan past. All archaeological identifications of temples and cult sites, he also found wanting. The only exceptions were Old Uppsala and long houses with exceptionally large cooking pits, which he considered as evidence of cultic feasting.

The existence of a temple at Uppsala is still disputed but Olsen's theory that ritual feasting took place in large long-houses with cooking pits which were otherwise

¹ Adam IV, 26, schol. 138, 139

² Olsen 1966: 7-54. See Adolf Friðriksson 1994a: 47-74 for the Icelandic material.

ordinary dwellings of chieftains or major householders has gained wide acceptance. A large ruin at Hofstaðir (Þ) in Iceland which was formerly considered as a type-site of a Nordic temple is now generally regarded as the residence of a chieftain where ritual feasting may have taken place. In Norway recent excavations have revealed extremely large long-houses which have been linked to cultic practices. In Mære in Trøndelag an excavation of the church there showed that it was built on top of a large long-house. This long-house looked like an ordinary dwelling in all respects except that in some of the post holes finds of gold-bracteates were made.¹ Excavations of an exceptionally long long-house (82 m) in Borg in Lofoten also revealed gold-bracteates in post holes and here an unusually large cooking pit was also found.² At both sites these finds have been interpreted as evidence for ritual feasting hosted by the chieftains who lived in these large halls. Gold-bracteates in post-holes are interpreted as a hallowing of the part of the house where the feasting took place.

These excavation results and the hypotheses based on them are widely regarded as a confirmation of Olsen's thesis, and heathen religious practices are now widely regarded as having consisted primarily of feasting at certain times of the year, and that these feasts were presided over by chieftains.³ We are therefore rid of the temples but the religious aspect of power in pre-Christian times is as strong a notion as ever. Recent research has even been able to produce a comprehensive view of the development of power and religion from the Bronze age to the high-middle ages.

Votive deposits in bogs - one of the main characteristics of South-Scandinavian society in the late Bronze and early Iron-age - cease abruptly in the early 6th century. Around the same time there begin to appear a few very large long-houses at centrally placed locations. This is interpreted as evidence for increased stratification of society and the beginnings of organised chieftaincies and/or petty kingdoms. These chieftains and/or petty-kings are supposed to have taken on religious responsibilities which had previously been exercised communally, and organised cult is therefore supposed to have become the prerogative of chieftains from the 6th century onwards. When Christianity was introduced the chieftains kept their role as religious leaders. It was they who built and owned the churches and paid for the priests, and in Iceland many of them became priests themselves.⁴

This view cannot be refuted, but it is based on many doubtful premises and an alternative, and more careful, approach will be suggested here.

¹ Lidén 1969

² Munch 1987, 1991

³ E.g. Skre forthcoming

⁴ A good overview in Graslund 1992. See also Wijkander 1983, Hildebrandt 1985, Olsen 1986, Bergner 1987, Karlsson 1987, Sandnes 1987, Graslund 1987a, 1991, Baudou 1989, Iregren 1989, Steinsland 1990a, 132, 1990b; 1991, Fabech 1991a, 1991b, Muller 1991, Brink 1992

The main criticism concerns the religious nature of feasting; eating and drinking can have clear social and political significance, but it does not have to have a religious connotation. The historical evidence for feasting in pre-Christian times and the large halls which have been excavated are evidence for the social significance of parties among the Germanic and Nordic peoples, and this did of course continue long into Christian times. Whether or to what extent the business of getting drunk was considered to be a religious act is and will always be impossible to know. Large buildings with exotic objects are evidence for social stratification; such sites indicate that in the society in question there were people who exercised power over others and could command resources over large areas. It is inherently likely that such people tried to link their political and social status to religious ideas, and it is not inconceivable that in Nordic society the chieftains were theocrats. There is however nothing in particular to suggest that they were, and the chieftains' involvement with the church in Christian times is more easily explained in other ways.

Gold-bracteates in post-holes do not necessarily signify that the part of the house in question was intended for religious ceremonies or feasting. It is just as likely that it means that people thought it was a good idea to hallow the roof-support of the house before they erected the posts. This may well have been a common custom, we should not expect to find objects of gold in other than the richest dwellings. Others could probably afford to be less ostentatious and use cheaper (and more perishable) material or altogether different methods. Gold-bracteates are therefore only evidence for the high status of the people who could afford to lay them in post-holes. Gold-bracteates in post-holes no doubt had a religious significance of some sorts but we are fooling ourselves if we pretend that we can know what kind of significance they had exactly.

Translating evidence for feasting into information about the nature of pagan religion is hazardous and it is even more conjectural to suppose that we can infer the type of power exercised by the leaders of society from the fact that some sort of parties took place under their auspices. Playing the host is an aspect of exercising power, or wanting to exercise it, and is absolutely not unique to Nordic society or its pagan past and has little significance for the religion of the culture in question.

It is unlikely that we will ever be able to study pagan religious organisation or, indeed, that we will ever be able to argue that such an organisation existed. It is in fact easier to comprehend pagan society and the subsequent developments if we do away with the religious functions of chieftains. Religious functions imply a duality for which there is no good evidence. Instead it is reasonable to assume that people who had, or aspired to, power, tried to establish their authority over every sort of gathering of people that occurred in their area: a basic requirement of power is people to exercise it

over. One of the effectual ways of asserting authority over gatherings of people is to have them take place at the home of the person who wants to exercise power, or some other place which is directly associated with him or her. That chieftains strove to do this in pre-Christian times is not only inherently likely but is also supported by the evidence of the very large long-houses. We do not need to know the nature of the gatherings that took place in the chieftains' halls to appreciate that they were one of the principal means through which power was maintained and exercised.

IV 2. Landscape and power

Commenting in 1956, on the reasons for the uneven development of petty states across Iceland, Jón Jóhannesson pointed out that it was easier to form states in densely populated and physically uninterrupted areas, than in scarcely populated regions intersected by mountains and fjords.¹ More recently Helgi Þorláksson has argued convincingly for the importance of good communications for the formation of the petty state of the Oddaverjar in Rangárbping. Central to his argument is the strategic situation of Oddi, the family's power base, which was not only on the high road across the southern plain but also had easy access to the surrounding countryside.²

These ideas centre around the theme of the formation of petty states. This only began in the last decade of the 12th century at the earliest.³ The petty states are usually regarded as the final stage in the corruption of the old order, a result of individual chieftains coming to own more than one *godðorð* and by getting their hands on all the *godðorð* of a region, thereby usurping the powers formerly exercised by the local assemblies (which were consequently abolished). This model of change takes it for granted that before this process began there existed a structure such as that described in *Grágás* - the 39 *goðar*, the strong local assemblies and virtual liberty of the *þingmenn* - a well-established structure of at least two centuries' endurance.

Jón Jóhannesson's and Helgi Þorláksson's arguments do however point towards a different scenario. In giving room for geographical factors in explanations of the development and characteristics of the Icelandic political system, questions naturally arise concerning its origins and the influences that shaped the system and its development. This is particularly significant considering that there are no reliable descriptive sources earlier than the 12th century - when it is imagined that the political structure had already begun to disintegrate - and that law texts are now seen as normative rather than descriptive. As a consequence geography and the environment,

¹ Jón Jóhannesson 1956: 280

² Helgi Þorláksson 1989a. See also the article Helgi Þorláksson 1979a.

³ On the petty states in general see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1989

along with archaeology, emerge as the likeliest candidates yielding material for creating ideas about Icelandic society in the 10th and 11th centuries.

In this work the position is taken that the development of the Icelandic political system was not a matter of a system being founded in the 10th century, collapsing in the 13th and then being replaced by an alien one, but much rather a continuing process of power structures becoming increasingly elaborate and effective; the submission to the Norwegian king being but a stage in that process. Here attention will be restricted to a few simple geographical factors which can go a long way to give insight into the initial rise of the powerful families we know from the 12th and 13th centuries.

Iceland is a large country (103 000 km² - 1/3 larger than Ireland), but only around 1/4 of the total area (24.000 km²) lies under 200 metres above sea level, and it is estimated that by the time of the settlement some 40.000 km² were covered with vegetation of some kind and the rest was barren.¹ The whole centre of the island is totally uninhabitable (and therefore a major barrier to communications, although it was crossed in times of need) and habitation is restricted largely to the coastal areas. In the habitable coastal areas three main types of physical environment can be identified. a fjord-environment, a valley- environment and a plain-environment. All types of environment can be found in all parts of the country, but a useful generalisation may be reached, based on the three main stages in the geological formation of the country's coastal areas

The oldest parts of the island (furthest from the Atlantic ridge) comprise the whole of the eastern coast (Austfirðir) and the north-west peninsula (Vestfirðir). These regions are characterised by deep fjords cutting into the basaltic Tertiary plateau, the mountain sides plunging almost straight into the sea, with only narrow strips of land available for human habitation. Closer to the ridge is the Mid-west (Breiðafjorður and (northern) Faxaflói) and most of the North (Norðurland), which are slightly later basaltic Tertiary formations characterised by wide fjords or bays with long and wide glacial valleys cutting into the highland, silted up with Quaternary deposits. In stark contrast, the length of the southern coast is uninterrupted flatland made up of Quaternary deposits, both alluvial and volcanic (i.e. lava, ash and pumice), fringing the late (Pleistocene and Holocene) dolerite and tuff formations. The southern flatland is cut in two by a mountain range representing the hub of the Atlantic ridge, governed on its southern fringe by two middle sized glaciers (Eyjafjallajökull and Mýrdalsjökull). To the east of these, there is considerable flatland reaching up to 30 km inland but it is dominated by glacial rivers, forever shifting their course in unstable alluvial sands, being thus both a major barrier to communications and a constant threat to settlement.

¹ Corresponding roughly to the area of habitable land the vast majority of which lies beneath the 200 m contour, although human habitation is known as high as 500 m a.s.l. Sturla Þórðarson 1987 171, 174

It is only on the western fringe of this area that there remains today a sizeable area of agricultural land, and although there is good evidence for much more widespread settlement in the middle ages, these settlements must always have been isolated from the rest of the country and internally inaccessible as well.

The western part of the southern flatland is very different, reaching much further inland - as much as 70 km - and having lava rather than alluvium as subsoil; its rivers are stable and comparatively passable. The southern plain, along with the somewhat smaller Borgarfjorður plain with its inland valleys, are the only two sizeable regions where there are large inland communities. In both these areas the seaboard itself is the least habitable. In Borgarfjorður, the coastal region (Mýrar) is dominated by deep bogs, difficult to utilise and a danger to travel. In the southern plain most of the coast is unstable sand-dunes, and the immediate hinterland (Flói (Á), Landeyjar (R)) is also dominated by bogs. In addition the southern coast, being sandy and unstable, has no inlets or good natural harbours. All these factors make the landlocked communities of these two plains largely independent of the sea, in terms of resources, communications and to some extent climate.¹

In considering the relevance of these three different types of environment for the development of social structures the factor of population has to be taken into account. In this context the size of the total population is the least important as well as being the least knowable. More important questions are how fast the whole country was fully settled and how the population was distributed. The former is an important point, because even if we want to believe Ari *fróði's* totally unverifiable words that the country was fully settled by 930,² that only has to mean that all land had been claimed, not that all land was already utilised.³ In fact it is natural to expect the full utilisation of the land to have been a long process of exploration and mistakes; woods had to be cleared and knowledge had to be established on how to make the most of available resources. Ari *fróði* informs us that Bishop Gizurr had assembly-tax-paying householders in each of the quarters counted, usually thought to have been preparation either for the tithe-law in 1097 or the splitting of the diocese in 1106, or both.⁴ Ari gives his numbers in hundreds, but as he himself uses both the (Latin) small hundred (= 100) and the (Nordic) long one (=120), we have no way of knowing whether the total was 3800 or

¹ This is of course true also of many other communities, the inland valleys of Húnaþing, Skagaljorður, Eyjaljorður and Þingeyjarþing, the highland settlements of the Northeast (Mývatnssveit (Þ), Fjoll (A)) and Hérað (A), the difference being that these are much smaller

² 'Wise men have said, that Iceland was fully settled in sixty winters, so that there has been no increase since' [Svá hafa ok spakir menn sagt, at á sex tegum vetrar yrði Island albyggt, svá at eigi væri meirr síðan] - ÍFI, 9

³ Jón Jóhannesson 1956 49

⁴ Jón Jóhannesson 1956 182

4560.¹ Tax-paying householders were 3812 in 1311² and these numbers correspond well with the number of *logbýli* known from the 18th century, ca. 4000, as opposed to homes which were 8191 in 1703³ and are likely to have always been much more numerous than independent farmsteads. As the number of independent farmsteads is an indicator of the extent to which the land as a whole was utilised, we can reasonably assume from Ari's numbers that as by 1100 tax-paying householders had reached the average observable in later centuries, a balance had been reached between population and land utilisation already by the late 11th century.

Ari gives the numbers of assembly-tax-paying householders in each quarter, and from these we can get an idea of population density according to environment types. The largest of the quarters, the eastern, had the fewest householders, that is 700. This quarter comprises the fjord-environment of the eastern coast and the glacier dominated plain environment of the eastern part of the south coast described above. The southern quarter is the smallest in area. It is almost entirely a plain environment, and had 1000 tax-paying householders. The northern quarter, almost entirely valley environment, was the most densely populated with 1200 assembly-tax-paying householders. The western quarter, with mainly fjord and some valley environment had 900 householders.

The figure for the northern quarter strongly suggests that valley environment could support the largest numbers, and the figures for the eastern and western quarters likewise suggest that the fjord environment could support the smallest numbers. It is natural to assume that social structures would develop first in the most densely populated areas. And so it may have. There is nothing to suggest that institutions like the spring-assemblies or the *þingmaðr-góði* relationship developed earlier in the southern plains rather than the northern valleys. In fact it could be suggested that these institutions developed later in the southern plain because it was initially not as accessible as the northern valleys, owing to the forest which covered most of the area. But once this forest was cleared a fundamental difference between these two quarters with the greatest populations becomes apparent in that the population of the North is divided between four main fjord-valley regions, cut off from each other by mountain ranges, while most of the population of the southern quarter is found in the uninterrupted southern plain.⁴ The point is then, that the southern plain is the largest single area with continuous settlement and can as such be expected to have developed and sustained more complex social structures locally than any other region in the country.

¹ IF I, 23

² DI IV, 9-10

³ Tollræði-handbók 1984, 34

⁴ The southern quarter also includes the Reykjanes peninsula (K), which was probably not as densely populated around 1100 as it became from the 14th century onwards, and the southern half of the Borgarfjörður plain, which no doubt was quite densely populated.

In order to understand how this may have come about, we can look more closely at how the different environment types affected social interaction in different ways. The factors which can be considered are modes of transport, distance from resources and access to other people to communicate with. As there is nothing which suggests otherwise, it is taken for granted that the distribution of settlement had by the 11th century reached the stage we know from later centuries and that subsistence patterns were not radically different from what is observable in later times.

Another important factor in this context is the way in which power is exercised. Even in the 13th century Icelandic society was very decentralised and lacked any kind of political entities that could wield executive powers. Among the small class of the politically free no individual or group of individuals was powerful or organised enough to be able to force its will permanently on others. In conditions like these one of the most easily identifiable sources of power is conflict management or the ability to settle disputes. That is, when two people quarrel and cannot settle their dispute it is natural that they or their friends turn to a third party for resolution. The stronger the persuasion of this third party the more likely that the dispute will be settled. As this third party will normally gain something for his (rarely her) efforts (at least reputation) it is in his favour if he can enhance his persuasive force. The means to do that are increased economic wealth (to give gifts, display outward signs of leadership, to take on and feed dependants, to do other people favours of various types), the building of a personal reputation, and the making of friends and forging of family ties with other important people. If our third party then manages to put himself in the position where he is indispensable in his role, he has gained power. And power has a tendency to breed more power, given the right circumstances. The restraining circumstances for the development of power that we can examine are those which are decided by the environment.

In a fjord environment a farmstead will normally only have had boundaries with the two farmsteads on each side of it. Lowland being normally scarce in the fjords, each farmstead will have needed a much larger area to sustain its household than in the two other types of environment, especially if the basis of the diet came primarily from agriculture and not fishing as in later centuries. Each farmstead will also have had access to the range of resources available from sea to highland, i.e. fish, home field and meadow, pasture and in many cases forest, driftwood and jetsam. Each fjord is a clearly defined geographical unit where internal communications will usually have been easy, whereas communications with neighbouring areas will have been difficult. As the average fjord is not very long, each fjord community was quite small. Considering this we can understand better why fjord environments normally could not sustain chieftains as they are known from the 12th and 13th centuries. The only

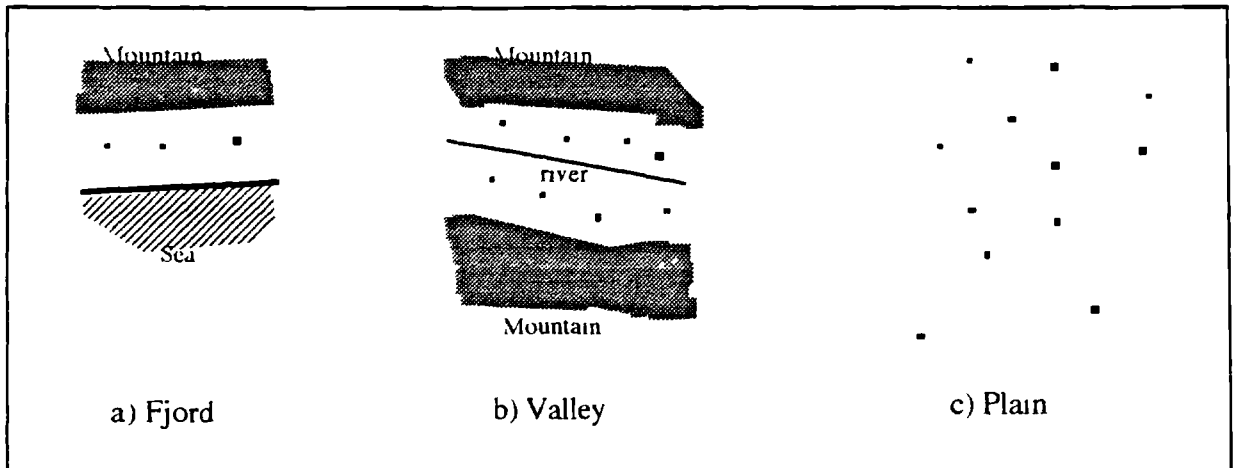


Figure 3 Schematic representation of the three different types of environment. Each • represents one farmstead.

chiefly estates attested in a fjord environment are Vatnsfjorður in Ísafjarðardjúp (V), Eyn in Arnarfjorður (V) and Reykhólar in Reykjanes (SD), all centrally placed in long and wide fjords with many smaller fjords branching off. No chieftain is known to have had his principal estate in any of the eastern fjords.

In fjord environments then, farmsteads were few and far apart, and each farmstead normally had access to all the basic resources within its own boundaries. All this means that social interaction will have been limited, both because of the physical barriers to communications and also because the economic need for close contact with others was slight. Areas of friction will have been fewer than in the other types of environment, simply because there were fewer resources and boundaries that had to be shared and because people had fewer opportunities or needs to meet and get on each other's nerves. It is therefore not surprising that spring assemblies are not well attested in either the eastern or the western fjords. The basic sources of power will also have been missing to a large extent, there were too few people accessible to any one individual for his power over them to be extensive, and too long distances to other powerful people to back anyone's local power. It is therefore clear that in fjord environments strong chieftaincies could not develop, they were neither needed nor sustainable. The only major chieftaincy we know which developed in a fjord environment was that of the Vatnsfirðingar. That exception becomes quite understandable if the map is consulted. The family estate Vatnsfjorður, is strategically situated, from the point of view of sea transport, in the huge fjord Ísafjarðardjúp, which is the only fjord environment where a large number of farmsteads in many small fjords are easily accessible to each other by sea. There was therefore a relatively large population which could relatively easily have internal dealings, and no doubt did as a consequence. No other fjord environment developed its own chieftaincy (the

chieftaincy of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson in Amarfjorður around 1200 is notable mainly for its failure to last) and the eastern and western fjords only came to experience the rule of chieftains when chieftaincies that had developed in other environments became strong enough to hold sway over large and faraway regions.

In valley environments circumstances were more favourable to the development of social structures like spring assemblies and chieftaincies. In a valley each farmstead will have had boundaries with at least three other farmsteads, on either side and across the river. Each farmstead will have had access within its boundaries to most of the important resources except maritime ones, but the major difference between the fjord and valley environments seems to have been that the density of settlement was much greater in the valleys than in the fjords or even the plains. The reason that most easily suggests itself is that the alluvial soil of the valley floors was more fertile than the (mainly aeolian) soil in the fjords, and that the more sheltered conditions in the valleys contributed to the build-up of rich humus. As a result many more people had much more contact with each other in the valleys than in the fjords. This is especially true of the four large fjord-valley systems of the North, each with 200-400 independent farmsteads within manageable reach of each other. In this environment people will have had plenty of opportunities to get upset with each other, and consequently we have both better attested spring assemblies in the northern valley systems and indications that strong chieftaincies began to develop early. In each of these valleys there were enough people and enough material riches to both call for strong third parties to settle disputes and make their accumulation of power relatively easy. Nevertheless there were limits to the extent to which these powers could grow, limits set by the abrupt physical barriers between each of these four valley systems. And none of the valleys was large or populated enough for its chieftain(s) to dominate the others. In fact none of the northern valleys became dominated by any one chieftain or family until around and after 1200.¹ It will be suggested here that the failure of the northern chieftaincies to develop further was mainly due to their inability to create the conditions for enduring families, like the Haukdælir and to some extent the Oddaverjar managed in the southern plain.

The southern plain has its natural barriers, most notably the great rivers Hvítá/Olfusá (Á), Þjórsá (Á/R) and Markarfljót (R). The density of settlement seems to have been quite uneven and only in areas like Fljótshlíð (R) and Olfus (Á) was it comparable to valleys like Eyjafjorður (E) or Fljót (Sk). Nevertheless, the single outstanding feature about the settlement patterns of the southern plain, is that they were

¹ It is accepted by most scholars that the Asbiringar had established a supremacy over Skagafjorður already by the beginning of the 12th century - Jon Johannesson 1956 279, Gunnar Karlsson 1975 34, Jon Vidar Sigurdsson 1989 44, 51, 60. The evidence for this is meagre and really only amounts to the Asbiringar being the most prominent family in Skagafjorður from at least the beginning of the 12th century but there is no direct evidence for their full control over the region until the 1190s

not shaped by any abrupt natural barriers (save the rivers mentioned above) and each farmstead consequently could have boundaries with a large number of others. The conditions for agriculture are quite varied within the plain and access to important resources will as a result in many cases not have been possible within the boundaries of a farmstead. Access to pasture will have been particularly problematic for the farmers of the coastal areas of the plain like Flói (Á), where access to forest will also have been difficult, whereas the settlements deeper inland will have missed entirely out on maritime resources. These conditions were of course very favourable to extensive and frequent communications between farmsteads within the region. And this region is large, probably with as many as 700 independent farmsteads by 1100. There was therefore much need and favourable circumstances for the development of social structures, and plenty of opportunities for chieftains to increase their powers.

The problem of the chieftains was that their powers were personal, i.e. they were based on an individual's ability to accumulate wealth, friends, family connections and trust. No chieftain had the means to ensure that his powers would pass on undiminished to his heirs, although in practice they were of course in the best position to take over. What was wanting was some factor, independent of life and death, which could ensure the dependence of others. Chieftaincy was an expensive job, and chieftains never seem to have managed to accumulate land or livestock to the extent that the dependants thus gained were enough to sustain enduring types of power. What was needed was some kind of inexpensive way of binding people to a place, the ruling of which secured the power of the occupant.

It was by linking their fortunes with the church that the chieftains of the South, of which the Haukdælir seem to have been the first, managed to create power bases which were independent of the lives of individuals, and thereby could ensure the endurance of their families. Chieftains elsewhere no doubt saw the same benefits in building churches and offering services to their neighbours but the difference was that in the South there was the room to expand this power and, most importantly, maintain it. The ability to maintain power over large areas depends largely on access to enough resources to finance the institutions which make power possible. This is easiest in Árnesþing where consequently the first episcopal see was established. Ecclesiastical institutions then sprang up in one region after another; first in the largest regions with dense settlement and later in smaller regions of more scattered settlement. Of the four northern valley systems Skagafjörður had the largest area of uninterrupted settlement as well as being the central region in the quarter. This access to resources as well as geographical centrality made Skagafjörður the natural place for the second episcopal see. The first monastery at Þingeyrar was established in Húnaþing, a region with equally many farmsteads as Skagafjörður but scattered over a larger area and divided between several valleys. The second monastery at Þverá was in Eyjafjörður which also

had equally many farmsteads as the other two regions but where they were firmly divided between three main valleys. The third religious house, Pykkvibær, was established in Álftaver (VS), a plain environment with far fewer farmsteads than Árnesþing or Rangárþing, and the fourth, Flatey/Helgafell in Breiðafjorður (SD), a rich fjord environment. In between these and in smaller regions of dense settlement major churches with many clerics were established: Oddi in Rangárvellir and Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (R); Reykholt, Stafholt and Hítardalur (where there was a short-lived monastery) in Borgarfjorður; Vellir in Svarfaðardalur and Moðruvellir in Horgárdalur (E); Grenjaðarstaður and Múli in Aðaldalur (Þ); Valþjófsstaður in Fljótisdalur and Vallanes in Vellir (A).

This kind of geographical determinism is only useful as a general indicator of the reasons behind the development of ecclesiastical institutions and its effect on the process of power consolidation. There must have been other factors which influenced this equation; it could for instance have been expected that power consolidation and/or the establishment of major ecclesiastical institutions occurred early in the relatively densely settled region of Borgarfjorður where it did not. Conversely it should not have been expected that power consolidation occurred as early in the eastern quarter as it seems to have done. It is interesting to look at the East in more detail.

In the inventory of churches attributed to Bishop Páll Jónsson (1195-1211) the nine churches of Hérað (A) are introduced as *grafar kirkjur*.¹ All other churches in the inventory are simply called *kirkja* (church), and it is difficult to see why only these should be identified in this manner. This could not be held to have any significance if there was not a clause in *Grágás*, suggesting that the burial-right of churches in the East was especially important. In a chapter on what to do if foreign merchants are suspected of wrongdoing, it is described that such cases could be tried at the home of a *goði*, instead of having to wait for the next spring assembly, which was clearly impractical, seeing that the suspects might not be around by then. In the case of the Eastern quarter it was however equally lawful to bring the suit at the burial-church nearest to the trading place.² Here burial-churches are being given equal importance to a *goði's* home as places to hold court, and this may be further evidence for the early power consolidation in the eastern quarter that most scholars suspect.³ There were supposed to be nine *goðorð* in the eastern quarter but in the 12th century these seem to have been held by only two families (the Austfirðingar and the Svínfellingar), and after 1220 by only one (the Svínfellingar). It may therefore have been deemed impractical for people to have to search out the two *goðar* over long distances. This may suggest that power

¹ DI XV, 3

² Grg II, 264. This chapter is only found in *Staðarhólsbók*

³ Bjorn Þorsteinsson 1953: 237, Jón Jóhannesson 1956: 274, Gunnar Karlsson 1975: 35, 37, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1989: 49-50, 57

consolidation began earlier in the eastern quarter than elsewhere or simply that there never were very many *goðar* in the East. A slightly different approach is to ask whether this could not be taken as evidence that the chieftains of the East had developed a more mature system of government than their counterparts in the other quarters in the 12th century. It is highly unlikely that they were indifferent to court proceedings; managing conflict was the principal source of the chieftains' power and wealth, and they must have had some way of making their influence felt at court proceedings held at burial-churches even if they were not there themselves. That sort of arrangement suggests well organised government, where power could be allocated to deputies in different areas. If this was the case we have here a good example of the influence of the church on the development of centralised power structures; the obvious ability of churches to become centres of administrative, as well as religious, activities was important leverage for the chieftains in their efforts to consolidate and formalise their powers in each area.

IV 3. The church and the increase in social complexity

In the early and mid-12th century a great number of chieftains were priests and all owned churches. It is argued here that owning churches and being priests helped chieftains to consolidate their powers. By providing services for their neighbours and receiving tithes from them they forged strong ties with the householders who lived closest to them and by richly endowing their churches they advertised their magnanimity and authority. Most importantly however the churches made it possible for the chieftain families to link their claim to power to their property so that the possession of a church farm was what decided who wielded power. This was probably the stepping stone needed for the development of institutional power to begin.

By the first decade of the 13th century a handful of families had acquired or were in the process of acquiring all the *goðorð* in the country. This did not mean that these overlords had much direct control over anything but their home-patch; it meant that a large number of local leaders and *stórbændr* had forfeited their right of representation at the Alþing and instead acknowledged the right of these overlords to lead in national politics. The local leaders had probably not grown weaker as a result of the power consolidation except in relative terms. It seems that the *stórbændr* in Skagafjorður in the 1250s had much tighter control of their areas and a better organisation than the *goðorðsmenn* in Dalir had had in the 1170s. The *stórbændr* had only lost out in the power struggle in the sense that they now acknowledged that there was a tier above them occupied by the chieftains to whom they owed allegiance.

There were therefore many families around 1200 who were losing the political initiative but had nevertheless firm control over their respective areas, a much firmer grip than their fathers or grandfathers had had. In the west, where the most detailed evidence is available, a number of families which had wielded power in the 12th century disappeared around 1200; the Reykhyltingar; Gilsbekkingar; Mýramenn; Ari *fróðr's* family in Snæfellsnes; the Reynistaðamenn and the Austfirðingar, but others who lost their *godorð*, like the Garðamenn; Hítðælir; Skarðverjar and Staðarhólmenn¹ continued to control their areas and were indispensable supporters of the chieftains in the struggles of the mid 13th century. Furthermore these families managed, unlike the five great chieftain families, to keep hold of their principal estates and rise to prominence again after the union with Norway in 1262-64. A similar pattern can be discerned in a few families which first appear around or shortly before 1200 and whose relationship with local power earlier in the 12th century is therefore unclear. The Melamenn; the men of Staðarfell; Rauðsendingar; Seldælir in Selárdalur and Staðarmenn in Steingrímsfjorður all became quite prominent in their respective areas in the 13th century.

What is notable about these families who did not play national politics but continued to govern their respective areas is that in most of them the heads were priests. In this they differed from the chieftain families the heads of which, as we have seen, for the most part ceased becoming priests before the end of the 12th century. This suggests that the local leaders had different aspirations from the chieftains. While regional and even national overlordship had become the aim of most of the *godorð*-owning families by the beginning of the 13th century, it seems that the local leaders reacted to the changing political situation by concentrating their efforts on consolidating their local power and improving their government. Many of them being priests is a clear indication that local power was their primary consideration.

The power spheres of these families were in many cases quite small, often not comprising more than a single commune and in some cases a single ministry. In the cases of the men of Staðarfell, the Skarðverjar and the Rauðsendingar the respective spheres of power included only one commune which was also more or less coterminous with the ministry. These were among the largest ministries in the country in the 14th century and there may have been a connection between that and the fact that the churches had been owned by powerful families in the 13th century. The Staðarmenn in Steingrímsfjorður probably had a larger sphere of power than a single commune, and the ministry belonging to their church was enormous before the establishment of the church at Kallaðarnes in 1317. The power spheres of the Hítðælir and Garðamenn were

¹ It is nowhere stated the the Hítðælir or Staðarhólmenn gave away their *godorð*, but neither are they mentioned as holding them after 1200. It may be that they never gave them away but 'lent' them away to the Sturlungar who then had actual control over them

probably also considerably larger than a single commune or ministry, although the ministries of Garðar and Kolbeinsstaðir, which was the Hítðælir's principal estate after 1221, were also extremely large.

By being priests the heads of the Garðamenn, Hítðælir, the men of Staðarfell, the Skarðverjar, the Seldælir in Selárdalur and the Staðarmenn in Steingrímsfjorður nurtured a strong and personal relationship with the flocks in their large ministries and this no doubt was an important element in strengthening their influence over their areas. Being priests also gave them a special status as magnates which became increasingly important as the 13th century wore on. It is particularly striking that in the 1250s when the political conflict in the country was beginning to seem unsolvable and unwinnable, many of the heads of the families above who had previously actively supported one chieftain or another began to take a more neutral stance and act as mediators and arbitrators between the warring chieftains. At this point it seems that many of these men had chosen to adopt an ecclesiastical identity instead of a secular one, they begin to conform to patterns of behaviour fitting ecclesiastical dignitaries. In the political turmoil of the 1250s this was probably first and foremost a welcome way for the heads of these families to distance themselves from political alliances and ties which were becoming increasingly uncomfortable. They had already begun to discard the old way of making politics, where power was measured in brute economic and military strength, and had adopted the new one where appointment to an office became the basis for power. It is no coincidence that families like the Hítðælir and the Skarðverjar became extremely successful in the new secular administration after 1262-64; it was families like them which had the resources and refinement to compete for offices at the Norwegian court and the economic and political organisation back home to be able to accomplish their tasks and hold on to their offices.

As there seems to be a connection between the size of ministry and the type of power associated with the family owning the church in the 12th and 13th centuries it is worth looking closer at the patterns which are revealed by studying ministry sizes. The geographical and economic data is mostly of 14th century date and the following discussion centres on the ministries of Dalir where such data is particularly plentiful.

There were 12 ministries in the region of Dalir in the early 14th century. Their size varied considerably both in area and number of farmsteads. The two smallest had only 3 and 8 farmsteads (Búðardalur and Sælingsdalstunga respectively) while the three largest had over 20 farmsteads (Hjarðarholt, Staðarfell and Skarð). Most of the ministries however had 11-15 farmsteads; this corresponds to the modal range of ministry sizes in the Western quarter. It is difficult to compare ministry sizes in different regions, because charters are not available for every church and many of them

	expected	observed		based on
	mean	mean	modal range	% of churches
Northern quarter	10.55	10.97	6-10	85 %
Western quarter	14.66	13.96	11-15	71 %
Dalir		14.10	11-15	100 %
Southern quarter	9.60	8.47	1-5	49 %
Eastern quarter	11.06	8.30	6-10	51 %
Iceland	11.24	10.77	6-10	66 %

Table 15 The mean and modal range of ministry sizes in the 14th century by quarters. The expected mean is found by dividing the number of tax paying householders in each quarter in 1311 by the total number of churches in each quarter.

do not mention ministry size. The tables below represent an attempt, based on available 14th century charter evidence.¹ It seems from the figures given in Table 15 that for some reason churches with large ministries are less represented in the charter material (or that their charters have a greater tendency not to disclose ministry size), but this does not alter the overall impression that in the regions surrounding the episcopal sees² most ministries tend to have been very small (1-5), with a few very large ministries (20+) in between. In other regions very small ministries are rare, while the majority are middle sized (6-15) or large.

	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36+
Northern quarter	12	37	27	9	4	4		
Western quarter	9	10	17	7	1	4	2	1
Dalir	1	3	5	1	1	1		
Southern quarter	21	14	9	3	1	2	1	
Eastern quarter	10	11	4	1			1	
Iceland	52	72	57	20	6	10	4	1

Table 16 The number of churches in each quarter by modal range of ministry size in the 14th century. Based on charters of 66% of the churches.

It has been argued here that church organisation is most likely to have developed first, and most rapidly, in the largest continuous areas of settlement, that is on the southern plains and the river valleys of the North. It must have been because of

¹ For the Northern quarter the charter collection of Bishop Auðun from 1318 was used - DI II, 428-85, and where this fails the charters of Bishop Pétur Nikulásson from 1394 - DI III, 512-590. For the others, DI I, 174, 180, 255-56, 266, 269, 272, 275, 304, 406, 408, 413, 418-20, 522, 594-97, DI II, 62-64, 66, 113, 257, 260-61, 378, 397, 403, 577, 616-17, 633, 637, 651, 662-70, 679-92, 695-98, 736, 741-42, 769-71, 774-79, 782-83, 785, 832-33, DI III, 69, 78-82, 85-92, 100-105, 107-11, 115, 124-26, 193-97, 237, 239-44, 256, 260-63, 267, 270, 301, 305-306, 324, 330-31, 403-4, DI IV, 39-236. The number of churches in Skálholt diocese is based on Bishop Páll Jónsson's list of churches from around 1200 with additions - DI XII, 3-15. The record of tax paying farmers from 1311 is in DI IV, 9-10.

² Especially in Rangárþing, Árnesþing and Kjalarnes in the South. The same tendency can be observed in Skagafljörður in the North but it is not as marked as in the South.

this that the episcopal sees were placed precisely in these regions. The establishment of the sees must have further accelerated the development of church organisation, and the strongest impact is most likely to be found in the regions surrounding the sees. That this results, among other things, in small ministries can be explained. There is nothing to suggest that the farmsteads of the southern plains or the northern valleys produced higher tithes on average than farmsteads elsewhere, nor were individual churches in these regions particularly rich, especially not on the southern plain, where small ministries were most common. That this is a matter of priests rather than church-buildings is clear; there is no significant difference in the ratio between farmsteads and church-buildings (i.e. any consecrated building, whether church, half-church or chapel) between the different regions of the country. The difference is that on the southern plain and in Húnaþing, Skagafjorður and Eyjafjorður more of the churches had ministries. There were fewer priests per capita in the East and West, they had larger ministries and were paid better for the chapel-mass, 3 ells instead of the 2 found in the North and South.

The reason for the difference in ministry size between regions probably lies in demand for priests. Scholars agree that power consolidation first began on the southern plain and in Skagafjorður. The Haukdælir seem to have acquired all powers in Árnesþing already in the 11th century, and by the late 12th the Oddaverjar controlled Rangárþing and the Ásbirningar Skagafjorður. In other areas power structures continued to be more fragmentary until after 1200.¹ In a relatively densely populated region like Árnesþing where the Haukdælir owned all the *goðorð* and therefore presumably had complete control, the contention for power must have been on a different scale and of a different nature than for instance in the smaller region of Dalir where there were at least two families owning *goðorð* and nobody was an undisputed leader of the region. In the latter region there was a small number of wealthy householders who could realistically contend for regional powers and representation at the Alþing. These were the men who would gain politically by building churches and providing the services of a priest to their neighbours and followers. Their goal was regional dominance and national importance. In Árnesþing the same kind of powers as were still a matter of contention in Dalir were already in the hands of the Haukdælir kindred and we can therefore expect a lower tier of affluent householders who could expect to win local prominence and influence with the Haukdælir by providing pastoral care for their neighbours.

The difference in ministry size between regions may therefore be a result of regional differences in political and social complexity in the period the ministry system was taking form. According to this explanation large ministries were predominant in

¹ Ion Viðar Sigurðsson 1989: 54-61

regions with only one tier of authority but small ministries in regions with two tiers, because the second tier accommodated a proportionately larger number of householders who saw it as politically advantageous to seek influence by providing pastoral care.

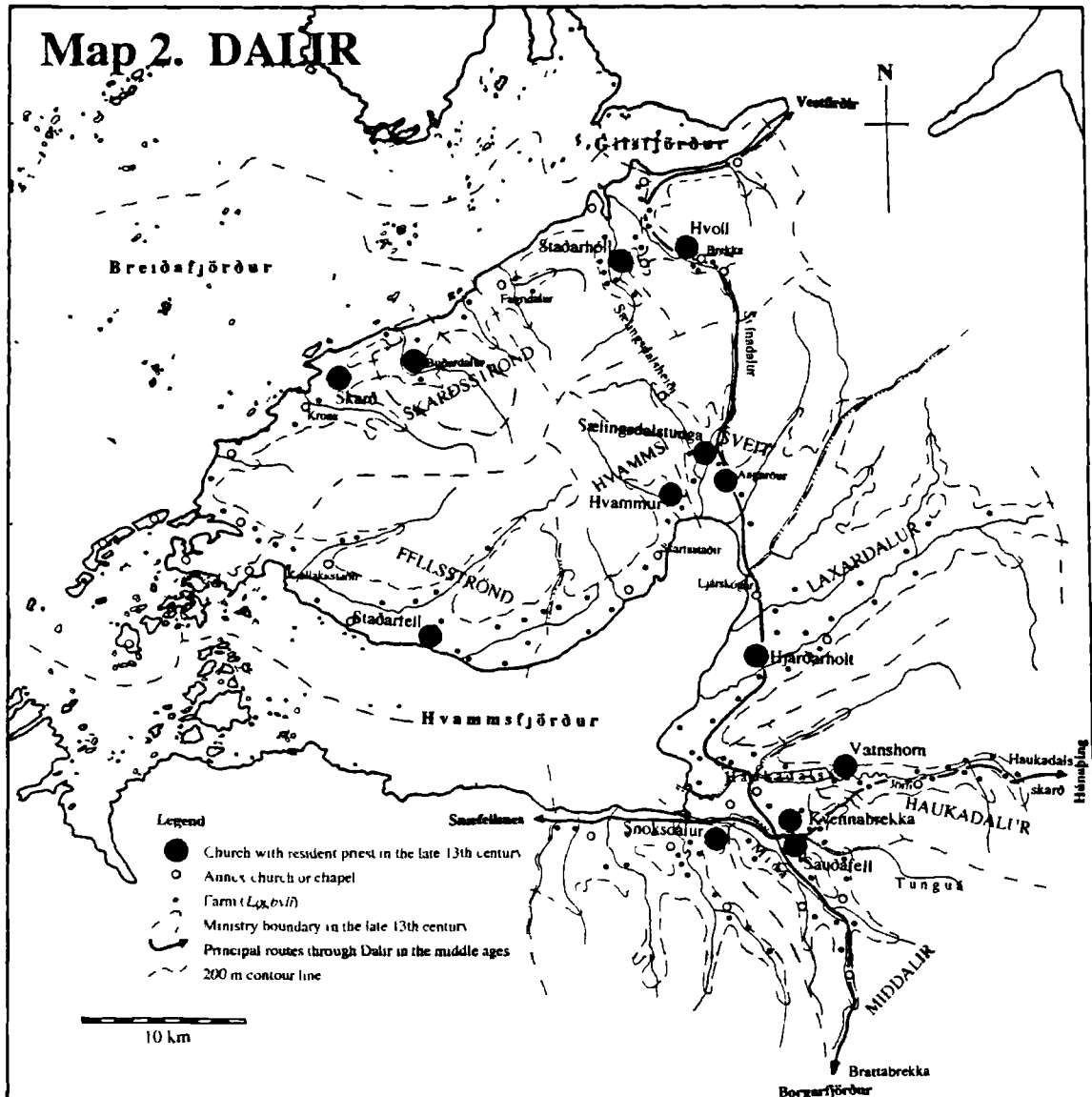
This explanation is only useful as a generalisation, and there were no doubt other factors which influenced developments in particular cases. This line of argument is however useful, not only to explain developments on a national scale but also at local level.

Dalir was a politically fragmented region in the 12th century, and this appears to have resulted in fairly large ministries. The differences in size within the region can be explained on similar premises. In the three large ministries of Skarð, Staðarfell and Hjarðarholt the church is situated in the centre of large, continuous and relatively sparsely settled areas, each corresponding to a modern commune, Skarð and Staðarfell each in a coastal area and Hjarðarholt in the mouth of the large and broad valley of Laxárdalur overlooking the coastal lowlands of the eastern side of Hvammsfjörður. Not counting the ministry of Búðardalur, the other eight smaller ministries are in more confined landscapes, valleys with a higher density of settlement. In these ministries the church was not situated in the centre of the ministry but towards one end. It was however as close to the centre of the geographical zone as was possible. Thus we have two churches in Saurbær - a single commune in modern times - Hvoll and Staðarhóll, each in a small valley branching off from the main lowland area, both closer to the geographical centre of the area than the centre of their respective ministries. In Hvammssveit, also a single commune later on, there were three churches with ministries around 1200, Hvammur, Sælingsdalstunga and Ásgarður - the last one was later to lose its ministry - all within a short distance of each other. In Suðurdalir the situation is slightly more complex. The ministry of Vatnshorn is a geographically well defined area, a narrow valley with a large lake in its opening creating a natural boundary; and so is the ministry of Snóksdalur, clearly divided from Miðdalir by a low mountain ridge. Each area corresponds to a single commune, but the churches are in both cases situated at the extreme edge of the ministries, as close as possible to the central lowlands of Miðdalir. In Miðdalir - a single commune - there were two churches, Sauðafell and Kvennabrekka, close to each other and both overlooking the lowlands.

In his study of the prominence of Sauðafell as a seat of secular power in the 13th century, Helgi Þorláksson has convincingly argued that the principal reason for its importance was because of its location on the cross-roads of much used routes.¹ In this and his other main study on communications and power consolidation,² Helgi

¹ Helgi Þorláksson 1991a.

² Helgi Þorláksson 1989a.



Þorláksson has mainly been concerned with showing how the strategic location of chieftains' power bases was an important element in state formation, and in Dalir in particular he emphasises the military advantages of controlling cross-roads and frequented routes. There is no arguing against it, that in the early and mid 13th century turmoil, strategic location could be of paramount importance for a chieftain's power struggle. It is however arguable that the same applied in more peaceful times, albeit on a different scale.

The principal land route from the Vestfirðir peninsula to Borgarfjörður and beyond lay through Dalir. Coming by way of Gilsfjörður in the north the route lay through Saurbær, passed Hvoll on its way up to the mountain pass in Svínadalur, came down again on the southern side to pass Sælingsdalstunga and Ásgarður, continued along the coast of the eastern side of Hvammsfjörður, past Hjarðarholt and on the plains between Haukadalsá and Miðá, west of Sauðafell and Kvennabrekka it crossed the other main route through Dalir, an east-west route between the northern quarter and

Snæfellsnes, coming through Haukadalsskarð in the east, through Haukadalur, over a low ridge by Kvennabrekka, over Tunguá past Sauðafell and thence westward past Snóksdalur. The north-south route continued from the cross-roads south through Miðdalir and to Borgarfjörður by way of Brattabrekka (see Map 2).¹

It is hardly a coincidence that the churches with smaller ministries are more or less lined up on these principal routes. A contributory factor may have been the religious desire to aid travellers, a concern expressed in many early charters, but that sentiment also had a more mundane side to it. A church with pastoral responsibilities was not only a centre of local devotion and gatherings; if it could attract people from other regions passing by, it also had the potential of becoming a centre where people would come and get news of foreign parts and even do some trading. The reputation of the church and its owner could reach other regions, but more importantly it would grow in his own backyard as a consequence of accommodating travellers.

Being situated on a much used route may therefore be viewed as a resource for a householder aspiring to, or wanting to consolidate, local power. In areas of relatively dense settlement, this resource can have been tapped by wealthy householders motivated to increase their influence. Density of settlement is the decisive factor here, because the benefits of attracting local people depended on their being able to attend the church frequently and in reasonable numbers.

On this basis we can formulate the hypothesis that there are more churches with smaller ministries in densely settled areas, through which frequently used routes lay, than elsewhere. In Dalir at least this holds well.

The combined ministries of Hvoll and Staðarhóll had some 24 farmsteads in them, the ministries of Hvammur and Sælingsdalstunga had 13 before the enlargement of the former in 1308² and Sauðafell and Kvennabrekka had 27 farmsteads together. The reason that in these three areas single large ministries did not form, must be connected with the potential for wealthy householders to increase their influence by providing pastoral care, created by the circumstances of dense settlement and proximity to regional highways.

The model of change presented here assumes that before the introduction of Christianity there were no mechanisms in place which allowed individuals or families to wield power over territory and the people contained within it, except through ownership of land.³ As far as can be seen lordship based on extensive landholding did

¹ Based on the research of Helgi Þorláksson 1991a: 99-101, 105 and the maps of the Danish High Command (Generalstabens Topografiske kort), Kjøbenhavn 1911-1914

² DI III, 8-9

³ This is a different question from the geographically fragmented power of *godar* in the late 12th and early 13th century. The fact that a *godr* might have *þingmenn* in other areas intermixed with *þingmenn* of

not develop in Iceland, nor did lordship based on military superiority. It was only with the churches and the subsequent division of the country into tithe-areas and ministries that the basis for sustainable territorial power was created. While this was the leverage needed for a few families to become overlords it caused an increase and not a decrease in the total number of men wielding power. Instead of a relatively limited number of chieftains with non-territorial powers there developed in the 12th century an even smaller group of territorial overlords who were able to exercise power over large areas and even whole quarters through their authority over a much larger number of local leaders. It was these local leaders who survived the upheavals of the 13th century to become the gentry of the late middle ages.

other *godar* does not mean that the latter did not have core territories inside which they were all powerful, it only means that the *þingmaðr* in question was, or wanted to be, independent of his local *godr*.

V CONCLUSION

Very little is known about pre-Christian religion in the Nordic countries and it may seem that this ignorance is only amplified if the notion is rejected that chieftains were also cult leaders. It does however help us to understand what Nordic pre-Christian religion was not and that again is a necessary precondition for a balanced evaluation of the impact Christianity had on Nordic societies.

With the possible exception of Denmark, 10th century Nordic societies were extremely simple constructions. There were kings and chieftains but their powers were limited and almost entirely based on military capacity. There was very little in the way of governmental structure, there was no regular taxation and the kings do not seem to have tried to proclaim law or control legislative or judicial activities. The majority of the population had little or no contact with the kings, and, in the words of Erik Lonroth, generally experienced their government only "as a passing catastrophe."¹ Most societal organisation was found at the village or district level. Communities were organised into defensive units, which normally translated into providing a fully manned warship, and this was, apart from plunder, the only tangible way in which the kings could extract levies from their subjects. They could however not summon the warships on their whim, but had to make their case with each community which would furthermore normally be reluctant to sustain prolonged campaigns. A ship's captain was appointed by the communities which manned the ship, and he and the crew would return to base whenever the prospect of plunder faded and/or was overshadowed by the need for able-bodied men at the harvest or hunt. The communities grouped together to convene assemblies where law or custom was discussed and decided on, and where court cases were heard and judgements made. By the 12th century the execution of court decisions in the Nordic kingdoms had become a royal prerogative and fines were collected by royal agents, but the indications are that this was a recent development and that, like in Iceland until the 13th century, the execution of court decisions and the collecting of fines was in the hands of victorious plaintiffs. It is likely that, outside the few areas which had access to towns like Hedeby, Birka or Kaupang, the assemblies were also venues for trading and if there were religious feasts the assemblies seem the most natural setting for such gatherings.

¹ Lonroth 1966 455

In societies such as these religious beliefs and customs are liable to be varied and localised. It is possible that origin myths and stories explaining natural phenomena circulated over large areas but practical day to day religion is likely to have focused on a local features, a stone, tree or grove, and possibly on spirits or beings which were exclusive to an individual, a family or a household. The Nordic pantheon, and the myths about its gods preserved in the Eddic poetry of the 13th century and in Snorri Sturluson's handbook for poets, the *Snorra Edda*, may well represent the shared world view of the warrior classes and their hangers-on, the poets. The few glimpses in other types of sources of what 12th and 13th century authors considered to be pagan beliefs do however suggest that ordinary people placed their faith in objects or features in their immediate surroundings and that the practice of religion was primarily a personal and not a communal experience.

It is easy to see the fundamental difference between this sort of religion and organised religion such as Christianity. Even before any churches were built or before episcopal authority had been established, the strength of Christianity as an organisation and as a vehicle of power, is readily apparent. Its strength lies in the ability to communicate the same message in different places, in different times and through different people. This ability is impersonal power i.e. power which is not dependent on the personal qualities, properties and/or associations of any one individual, but on the allegiance of a number of individuals to one idea or ideology. If this sort of power existed in the Nordic countries before the advent of Christianity it must have been very primitive and there is certainly no good evidence for it. Impersonal power is the stuff of effective institutional power, especially where the coercive abilities of the latter are under-developed or restricted. Institutional power can exist without any element of impersonal power, mechanisms or chains of command can become quite complex and yet still rely on only the qualities or abilities of the individuals involved. There are however limits to how large such organisations can grow and they are not likely to outlast the lifetime of the key-individuals.

The ability of Christianity to provide the means for more sophisticated institutional power is what this dissertation has dealt with. It is stressed that there are no grounds for viewing the process of Christianisation in Iceland - and it is felt that this holds for the other Nordic countries as well - in terms of a reaction and adaptation to a fully developed alien institution or the assimilation of such an institution by indigenous power structures. Instead it was a matter of a gradual development of both secular and ecclesiastical institutions, the growth of one being dependent on the growth of the other. Indeed the degree of interdependence was such that for at least a century and half after the conversion Icelandic secular and ecclesiastical institutions were to a large extent indivisible.

The church provided the means for more sophisticated types of power; by its very nature as an institution it provided leverage for chieftains to consolidate and accumulate regional power. By the same token it prompted and facilitated the introduction of taxation which in turn resulted in new social bonds and helped create territorial divisions. Through the need to finance the churches new forms of land-ownership developed which by the 13th century helped loosen the direct ties between territory and power and paved the way for new types of government. It would be excessive to claim that the church was the primary reason behind the societal changes Icelandic society was undergoing in the 12th and 13th centuries. It was however clearly of paramount importance as it helped create new distinctions, of social class, social bonds, property and territory as well as gradually becoming itself an institution with its own political agenda. The development can be sketched thus:

The indications are that by the end of the 10th century political institutions were still very primitive in Iceland. Some sort of judicial system was in place with conflicts being resolved at assemblies when other methods failed, but there are no signs of significant political groupings. While individual chieftains may have been quite powerful there were definite limits to the extent of their powers and they were unable to ensure that their powers were handed undiminished to their sons or heirs. It is difficult to see that the conversion to Christianity in 999 or 1000 was a politically significant event at the time - the apparently peaceful nature of the decision seems to indicate that there was no political grouping which could make political capital out of opposing the nominal acceptance of a new religion. The very slow development of the church in the 11th century supports this interpretation. The effects of the presence of a series of foreign missionary bishops in the country from the 1020s to the 1060s is difficult to assess, but it is clear that pastoral care in Iceland did not come to rely on foreign priests or Icelanders dependent on foreign patronage. Instead members of aristocratic families began as early as the 1020s to invest in clerical education for their sons. By the last quarter of the 11th century these aristocratic priests had begun to provide clerical education in Iceland for their peers' sons. By the beginning of the 12th century a significant number of the country's chieftains were ordained and most of those who were not had their eldest sons ordained.

Aristocratic interest in the priesthood seems to have begun in areas of continuous settlement with large populations and it is argued that it was precisely in such areas that the pressures were greatest on the chieftains to find new ways of consolidating their powers. This, it is suggested, was accomplished by the patronising of a congregation; by making the chieftain's neighbours dependent on his pastoral services; through the prestige gained by maintaining a impressive church; by catering for the needs of travellers, but most importantly by transporting the idea of a chieftain's

authority from his person to his church or *staðr*. In this way aristocratic families could consolidate their authority over the neighbouring countryside and build on the successes of several generations.

The only clearly demonstrable link between pagan cult and Christian ritual is that of burial-place. It seems that in the early 11th century when Christian cemeteries were taken into use, they were situated on the same principle as the pagan grave-fields had been, i.e. outside the home-field of each farmstead or estate. It is suggested that the origins of the very high number of chapels and annex-churches found in Iceland in the late middle ages are to be found in these private cemeteries. Chapels and oratories may have begun to be built in these cemeteries by the middle of the 11th century, but they remained very different institutions from the churches which were served by a resident priest. While a chapel and oratory seems to have been intended solely for the private use of the family or household which owned it, churches with resident priests were intended to attract crowds of people at regular intervals. It is suggested that the number of such churches grew slowly but steadily throughout the 11th century so that by 1097 when the tithe was introduced a significant proportion of the population had become used to and even dependent on regular church-attendance and clerical ministrations. It is argued that while the introduction of the tithe in 1097 can be seen as an indication of the extent to which Christianity had permeated Icelandic society, its acceptance is primarily an indication that those chieftains, or householders aspiring to influence, who had not yet augmented their local influence through the patronage of a congregation had been convinced that it was beneficial for them to fill the ranks of those who did. It is also argued that the acceptance of the tithe was to a considerable extent due to a need to rationalise the system of poor relief. Following the introduction of the tithe it seems that the number of churches where regular services were offered, and the owners of which could collect tithe from their congregation, increased fast. The first two thirds of the 12th century was the time of grand endowments of churches and the establishment of small religious houses. These investments by the ordained aristocracy are an indication of the importance attached by it to the patronage of religious institutions and a witness to the inflation which had set in regarding the measures ordained chieftains felt they needed to take to stay in the race for power.

The number of chieftains in the 11th century was probably small and fluctuating but there are no signs of significant differences in the scale of power wielded by each one. By the 12th century families begin to appear who held sway over whole regions. These appear first in large areas of uninterrupted settlement and it is argued that these families owed their supremacy in part at least to an early involvement with the church. In such areas late medieval parishes tend to be small and it is argued that the creation of overlordships of whole regions created room for a second tier of chieftain, local leaders who had authority over a district or commune and owed allegiance to their overlord.

Regions where parishes were larger remained politically fragmented until the end of the 12th century and the creation of a second tier of local leaders took correspondingly longer. The chieftains who belonged to this second tier, which may have begun to appear as early as the second third of the 12th century, did not all become ordained themselves but could rely on priests hired on annual basis. Many chieftains of this type were however ordained until the second half of the 13th century.

By the last quarter of the 12th century many of the overlords and more powerful chieftains had consolidated their powers to such an extent that they no longer needed to be seen to be directly involved in ministerial work and they begin to let it suffice to hold lesser ordinations. At the same time the class of district priests begins to become more visible. These were often of high birth but scanty prospects. Typically they were younger or illegitimate sons of chieftains or major householders or, in aristocratic families, sons of sisters. These men were economically dependent on the householder whose church they served and class-consciousness developed very slowly among them. In connection with the increasingly complex administration of the overlords and some chieftains, especially after the 1220s, several clerics began to make careers as scribes, counsellors and mediators, on the strength of their skills and special status. By the middle of the 13th century ordained local leaders begin to appear as mediators in the disputes of overlords and prominent prelates become almost indispensable as intermediaries and arbitrators. At the same time clerical celibacy was being introduced quite successfully and all this indicates that by the third quarter of the 13th century a large part of the clergy was becoming more and more conscious of having a separate identity which set it a part from laymen. In short, a class of people had emerged whose social status and political rights depended not on their family or personality but on validation by an institution. Mirroring this development the overlords and great chieftains became, or were replaced by, royal officials after the union with Norway in 1262-64.

In the last quarter of the 12th century - at the same time as direct aristocratic involvement with the church was waning - the bishops begin to show signs of having an agenda of their own, an agenda which aimed to protect and further the interests of the church as an institution. Many of the early bishops had been chieftains of powerful families, and those who were not were protégés of such families. Their administration was simple and they seem mainly to have been concerned with building splendid cathedrals and ensuring the financial well-being of the sees. Following the establishment of the new archbishopric of Niðarós in 1152 the Icelandic bishops became subject to direct pressure from abroad and this coincided with clerics with a reforming turn of mind being elevated to the bishoprics, St Þorlákr to the see of Skálholt (1178-93) and Guðmundr *góði* to the see of Hólar (1203-37). Under St Þorlákr and his colleague at Hólar, Bishop Brandr, the concept of *ius patronatus* was

introduced and accepted by church owners without much opposition. This did not ensure ecclesiastical control over church property but ensured that the bishops had a right to oversee the management of church property and to step in where abuses took place. St Þorlákr's main emphasis was however on marital reform, especially on enforcing rules against incestuous marriages. This became more contentious but seems to have had considerable success and there was certainly no sense that the bishop's right to supervise these matters was questioned. Guðmundr *góði* was much less successful, indeed he seems to have managed to create an impasse in the development of episcopal authority until 1237 when he and his counterpart at Skálholt were replaced by Norwegian bishops. In the 12th century the bishops had been and/or acted like chieftains and there is no clear sense that they differentiated between secular and ecclesiastical interests. This sense was clearly established by the Norwegian bishops and by 1270 when Icelandic bishops had taken over both sees anew, an Icelandic church with a clear sense of its own identity and separate interests had come into being

LIST OF TERMS

alin, pl. **álnir**: Ell. A measure, 47,7 cm or 55,6 cm. As a length of homespun, the basic medium of exchange, the a. was a currency unit; one *hundrað* equalled 120 á.¹

alkirkja, pl. **-kirkjur**: Full-church. The earliest example of the term is in a charter from 1399.² It is normally only used when referring to a church where full service was given but was served by a priest attached to another church.³ There were some 40 such churches in the country in the 14th and 15th centuries.

annex-church see *útkirkja*

Alþing see *alþingi*

alþingi: Alþing. The general assembly convened at Þingvellir (Á) in the end of June every year and lasted for two weeks. It was the venue for the Law court (*lögretta*), the legislative council, and the quarter courts and the fifth court, the court of the final instance.⁴

aristocrat: Although Old Icelandic had no corresponding term there was a clear sense that some people were by birth better than others. There was not a clearly defined class of nobility but

distinctions were nonetheless made between families which determined their status. This is expressed with a range of terms like *göfugr* (= noble), *kynborinn* (= high-born), *stórmenni* (= distinguished person/people), *góðrar ættar* (= of good family/lineage) et c.⁵

assembly-tax see *þingfararkaupsbóndi*

bóndi, pl **bændr**: Householder. A b. (man or woman) was (in theory) in total control over his or her household which in the majority of cases was made up of a married couple, their children, servants and dependent relatives. Although a farmstead could be shared by more than one household, each household was an independent economic unit with its own field, meadows, pastures and livestock. The b. was responsible for his or her household members in all outside dealings and was the only member of the household who had political rights, although grown-up sons of b. often managed to be politically active without heading a household of their own. Invariably this was a shortlived arrangement. B. who owned a minimum property (*þingfararkaups-bændur*) paid the assembly-tax to those b. who accompanied their chieftain to the Alþing. Those who did not own this minimum (*þurfamenn*) qualified for support from their commune.⁶

burial-church see *graptarkirkja*

bændakirkja see *staðr*.

bænhús, pl. **bænhús**: Chapel. In a relative sense the term can be used of any small dependent church.⁷ In the charter material the term does however seem to have a better defined meaning, at least to the extent that it always refers

¹ Magnús Már Lárusson 1958a, Gísli Gestsson 1977

² DI III, 536 This charter is a copy of a slightly older one from 1360x89 and it is interesting that the wording there 'Burtsongur til half kyrkiu og til kyrkiu er huorn dag helgann sungid og til tueggia Bænhusa' - DI III, 164, is changed here to 'Burtsongur til halfkyrckiu og alkyrckiu og til tueggia Bænhvsa.'

³ For instance the church at Grund in the parish of Tjorn in Svartaðardalur (E) which is called *alkirkja* in the inventory of 1486-87 - DI V, 356, but is referred to in a charter of Tjorn from 1318 as a church where the priest should sing every holy day [syngia huorn dag helgann til Grundar] - DI II, 457 and subsequent versions, from 1394 - DI III, 513-14, and 1461 - DI V, 258-59

⁴ LEI, 1-9; Vilhjálmur Finsen 1873, 1888, Maurer 1874a. esp 160-86, Einar Arnórsson 1945, Ólafur Lárusson 1958a 55-90, Miller 1990 17-23

⁵ Sørensen 1993 173-76

⁶ Þorkell Jóhannesson 1933, esp 121-151, Árni Pálsson 1931, Magnús Már Lárusson 1957a, 1962d, 1962j, Miller 1990 111-37, Sørensen 1993 152-61.

⁷ In other records than charters, esp episcopal statutes, *bænhús* is regularly used as the alternative to parish-church (*sóknarkirkja*) - DI II, 188, 639, 641, 795, 801

to churches of lesser status than half-church.¹

As opposed to full-, half-, and possibly quarter-churches, the number of masses in *b.* seems to have been fixed for every year (12 masses per annum is most common) probably because feasts were normally not celebrated in them.² There are also indications there could be a special kind of mass or service which was observed in *b.*, distinct from, and probably less substantial, than that observed in full-churches and half-churches. The concept *bænhússonngur* or 'chapel-song' used in a few charters as a definition of the service required at *b.*, might refer to the type and not amount of service.³ In a 13th century charter of Búrfell the service required at its two dependent *b.* is explained as '7 masses and 13 *bænhúsdagar* (lit. 'chapel-days') and '12 masses on legally prescribed holy days and 12 *bænhúsdagar*'.⁴ There are no other examples of this concept and there is no evidence for what went on on a 'chapel-day', but it clearly was some kind of service observed only in *b.*

¹ As in '[one of the priests at Staðarbakki (H) church shall also sing at] a half-church and a church where there is song every holy day, [and] 2 chapels' DI II, 483, or '[Subject to Kállatell (A) church are] a church in Borgarhólm [which] goes without song every fourth [holy day - i.e. it has 3/4 service], a half-church at Breiðabólstaður and another at Reynivöllur, and 4 chapels, [the priest shall] take [i.e. be paid] 6 ounce units [36 ells] for three [of these chapels], for one 5 ounce units [30 ells] [he shall] Take 6 ounce units and one hundred for Borgarhólm [156 ells], but one hundred for each of the two others [120 ells each]' - DI II, 771 also DI II, 770-71 DI III, 243-44, DI IV, 200-201, 234-35 In the Eastern quarter there are examples of of fees for chapels as high as 2 marks (96 ells) but this seems to be a regional variation on prices rather than indicative of different status.

² E.g. the charters of Dalur (R) where it is set down that a priest shall sing 'every holy day' at one dependent church, 'every other holy day' at two (half)churches whereas for three lesser churches the number of masses (12 in each) is stated - DI II, 683, also DI III, 262-63. There are a few exceptions from the rule that feast days were not celebrated in chapels, e.g. DI II, 409-10, 360.

³ DI II, 635-36, 668.

⁴ DI II 63-64. 7 and 13 masses may be scribal errors for 12 masses (xij becomes vii and xiiij).

It is more likely that it was the usual observance at *b.* and that these *b.* were exceptional in that 'ordinary' masses were sung in them, than that the term was constructed for some special kind of observance which was rare in these lowest ranking churches. Another indication of what might go on in *b.* comes from the earliest charter of Dalur (R), probably from the 13th century. It names three *b.*, two of which have a service of 12 requiem masses. The third however has simply 12 masses,⁵ so this cannot be used to suggest that requiem masses were the prevalent type of service in *b.*, although it would seem the most suitable type of service for these small buildings, which can hardly have been attended by more than the household of the farm where they stood. Presumably the primary function of a *b.* was to be an oratory for members of the household, and there may have been *b.* where priests never gave services, although there is no direct evidence for that and the extremely high number of *b.* where we do know some service was held at - one to every three or four farms - hardly makes room for many un-serviced *b.*⁶ We can only speculate why people built and maintained *b.*, but piety and prestige are the simplest explanations. There was hardly anything else gained by such investment; direct influence over neighbours such as owners of half- and full-churches could plan on, was unlikely as *b.* received no tithes or dues and were serviced too infrequently for any relationships of dependency to have formed. If then a *b.* was mainly a

⁵ DI III, 1. In a second generation charter from Dalur (R), probably from the first half of the 14th century only one of the chapels has 12 requiem masses - DI II, 683.

⁶ The phrase 'those chapels which the bishop permits song at' as in DI II, 641, 801, implying that there were chapels which the bishop did not permit song at, is probably formulaic rather than direct evidence for un-serviced chapels, unless it refers to masses sung without permission. The chapel at Eyvindarmúli (R) discussed in ch. II 42 may be an example of an un-serviced chapel although the charters of the church at Eyvindarmúli by no means exclude the possibility that it was serviced. There would have been no reason to mention the chapel as it was owned by the same people as the church.

symbol of the wealth and piety of the family which owned it, there can hardly have been much reason to pay for public 'ordinary' masses in them. A more personal type of service, like singing requiem masses for deceased members of the household and the family's ancestors, seems a more likely option.

caretaker *see* varðveizla

charge of church *see* varðveizla

chieftain: Used in this work in the wide sense of anyone with authority over men or territory. It includes men who were called *goði*, *hǫfðingi*, *stórhǫfðingi* and *stórbóndi*. The ownership of a *godorð* is not considered to be a requirement for the status of c., there were people who owned *godorð* (*godorðsmenn*) who did not have any visible authority to go with it, and there were men of considerable influence who did not own *godorð*. In the 13th century some c. were overlords (*stórhǫfðingjar*). These usually owned or controlled more than one *godorð* and their authority was acknowledged by a number of local leaders (*stórhændur*). The local leaders were often in firm control over their respective areas but the territorial range of their influence was limited.

The term *goði* is used in *Grágás* in the same sense as *godorðsamadr* but in narrative sources it appears mainly as the appellation of certain chieftains. Why some chieftains earned the designation and others did not is unclear.

Commonwealth. The term preferred here for the constitutional entity which existed in Iceland from the 10th century to 1262-64 when it became a domain of the Norwegian king. The term Free state which is also sometimes used in this context has the benefit of drawing attention to the main defining feature of this entity, namely that it was not a part of any other state. It is however more misleading than commonwealth as it implies some sort of statehood.

commune *see* hreppr

control of church *see* forráð

district. Used of subdivisions of region. A district sometimes corresponds to the area of one *hreppr*, although they are often larger.

ell *see* alin

eyrir, pl. **aurar:** Ounce unit. Unit of measurement, 27 and 32,5 grammes. 8 a. equalled 1 mark. As a currency unit the e. could equal three to six ells.¹

family, = ætt pl. ættir; Family was significant in three ways. As lineage, as kin and as the basic social/economic and sometimes political unit.

Lineage was important for social status. A lack of respectable ancestry was a serious drawback for people of wealth who aspired to influence and social respectability (like Hǫgni in *Bær* (B) and Þórir in *Deildartunga* (B)²) whereas for those who had important ancestors stood a good chance of bettering their position even if they lacked funds (e.g. *St Þorlákr*).

A person's kin could extend to fifth cousins if the laws are to be believed but according to the Contemporary Sagas in practice only second cousins were recognised as kin.³ The kin also included the in-laws. As each individual's kin-group was particular to him or her these did not constitute social groups capable of acting in unison or of recognising common interests. The importance of the kin was primarily as a framework for the maintenance of paupers and as an accessible group of people who were likely to be well disposed towards a kinsman in need of economic, political and even military support. Ties of kinship did not necessarily however decide allegiances and kinsmen are often found on opposing sides in conflict.

The primary importance of the f., and the sense in which the term is mainly used in this work, is as the basic social and political unit. This was a fluid grouping and could connect more than one household. The f. included a father and mother and at least the son or daughter who took over the family farmstead. At any one time the numbers in this group could be swelled by grown sons and sometimes these headed their own households but acted in unison with each other and their father towards

¹ Magnús Már Lárusson 1958a.

² Bsk I, 284 *Sturl*, 90-91.

³ Agnes S. Arnorsdóttir forthcoming

others. The coherence of this sort of group varied according to circumstance; in Rangárþing the sons and grandsons of Sæmundr Jónsson (d. 1222) appear more or less as a single political group and this was probably because their power over the region was based on their cooperation and unity. Brothers often made up teams in politics (the sons of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson; the sons of Brandr Jónsson in Staður in Steingrímsfjörður (V); the sons of Dufgus etc.) but the f. was only continued through that one of them who came to possess the f. estate or wielded most power. If more than one brother managed to establish himself as a householder they might act in concert while they lived but the nephews would not necessarily do so and each of these would begin to constitute a f. of his own.¹

fjórðungskirkja, pl. -kirkjur:

Quarter-church. The term² is only found in records from Hólar diocese - the earliest known example is from 1385³ - and seems never to have been used systematically in ecclesiastical documents until the inventory of 1486-87. It is however clear already at its first occurrence that it had a clear meaning as a definition of the number of services required at the church in question. There are only two examples of the term from the 14th century, and both are in secular deeds of property transfers.⁴ As there are only six examples of charters stating that masses should be sung every fourth holy day at a church,⁵ that could indicate that this was simply a very rare type of church. There were not many lesser churches which were to have 24

masses sung annually either,⁶ and it is far from clear whether these were two separate types of church or whether there were merely two different ways of explaining the services required at a f.⁷ It is therefore difficult to assess if the term f. refers only to the few churches where service was one fourth of full service, if it refers also to the similarly small group of churches where 24 masses were sung annually, or if it simply never was a clearly defined concept and was used of both types of church (if there were two different types, that is). F. are sometimes referred to as chapels,⁸ and this may suggest that they were either seen as a subgroup of

⁶ DI II, 480-81, DI III, 169, 532-33 are the only 14th century examples. DI VII, 71-72, 75-76, 437-38 are 15th century examples. The rarity of this type of church must be seen in light of the fact that it is rare for charters to give the number of masses to be sung in dependent churches, there are only 29 14th century churches for which the number of masses to be said is known.

⁷ This latter could be supported by the 14th century charters of Hoskuldastaðir (H), which give the number of masses at 3 churches called quarter-churches in the inventory of 1486-87, as 25 in 1318, 25 in 1360x89, 27 in 1395 and 24 in 1399 - DI II, 470-71, DI III, 170-72, 532-33, 599-601, DI V, 354. This difference in the number of masses to be said annually might represent attempts to convert 1/4 of full service into numbers.

⁸ For instance a charter of Haukadalur (Á) from 1382x91 requiring that 'at Neðri Haukadalur masses should be sung every fourth day as is appropriate for chapels' [J nedra Haukadál skal syngja enn fjórða hvern dag sem hlýtz til bænhvss] - DI IV, 39-40. Also Skíðastaðir in Laxardalur (Sk) in 1333 1388. There is a quarter church there and the priest is to be paid one mark.

The [seller] disavowed liability for the depreciation and maintenance of the chapel and its property' [er þar fjórðungs kirkja ok loka Mork prestu. Skildi gízvr af sier tynd ok uppgjörd æ bænhvss ok þui er þat ættu] - DI III, 426. Cf. the church at Núpur (R) where mass was to be sung every fourth holy day in a charter of Ásóltsskali from the 12th or 13th century but is called a church as distinct from chapels belonging to the parish of Holt in a 14th century charter. It may be that as well as being transferred from the parish of Ásóltsskali to that of Holt sometime between these two documents, the church at Núpur was upgraded to a half-church as its owner had to pay the normal half-church fee of 2 marks according to the later charter - DI II, 681-82.

¹ Sigurður Línal 1976a, Sørensen 1977 30-37, 1993 165-86, Miller 1990 139-78.

² Not to be confused with the Norwegian *fjórðungskirkja* which means the principal church of a region (quarter). NgL I, 813, 115, also NgL III, 309-30, (*fjórðungs prestur*), Baugé 1959 380, Smedberg 1973 46.

³ In a deed of the sale of Auðunarstaðir in Víðidalur (H) - DI III, 383.

⁴ DI III, 383, 426.

⁵ DI I, 255-56, DI II 63-64, 667-8, 669-70, 742 DI III, 244, DI IV, 39-40, 49-50.

chapels or, which is more likely, that neither term was very strictly defined.

forráð (pl): Control. (also *forræði*). In the case of churches this term is used of the right of the caretaker to govern his church. Cf. *varðveizla*.

goði see chieftain

goðorð, pl. **goðorð**. Chieftaincy. A *goðorð* was an inheritable and purchasable unit of power. Women and minors could own g but not act in them. According to *Grágás* there were 39 g. in the country, 12 in the Northern quarter and 9 in each of the others. In theory each spring assembly was held for a region og three g. The owner of a g. was entitled to a seat in the Law court (see *Alþing*). *Grágás* gives detailed information as to the duties of people who owned g. at the *Alþing*, but it has little to say about the responsibilities or rights of *goðorðsmenn* when they were at home. It has proved impossible to identify the 39 g. or their owners at any particular point in time. In the 12th and 13th centuries it is clear that people who wielded power in Iceland were much fewer and some of them owned more than one g. The traditional interpretation of the nature of g. is to understand it as a unit of real power, i.e. that a g. automatically bestowed authority and political responsibility on its owner. It is furthermore normally assumed that the system was set up in 930 and that the lack of *goðorðsmenn* in the 12th and 13th centuries represent a decline of the system. The suggestion that a g. was in fact only a license to take up a seat in the Law court makes much more sense.¹ That would explain the lack of congruence between the g system as described in *Grágás* and the realities of power apparent in the Contemporary sagas. See also chieftain

goðorðsmaðr, pl. **-menn**. Owner of a *goðorð*. See *goðorð* and chieftain.

graptarkirkja, pl. **-kirkjur**: Burial-church. The term itself suggests that there could be churches which did not have burial rights, and some of the contexts it appears in indicate that it was used as a definition of high-ranking

churches. The term was coined sometime in the early 12th century, suggesting that at that time there were churches which did not have the right to burial, and that this right was in some way significant for the status of a church. It is however also clear that churches which did not have resident priests or full services could have burial rights. By the end of the 12th century the term is being used of churches with high status, churches on which chapels were dependent and churches where public events could take place. Sometime in the 13th century the term lost ground, probably because the term *sóknarkirkja* (parish church) became a more accurate description of the emerging group of churches which had permanently resident priests and defined areas of jurisdiction. The continued use of the term in the 14th and 15th centuries, was probably because the word already existed in the language and could be used to describe any church with a cemetery, and possibly because of the influence of Norwegian church rank terminology.

hálfkirkja, pl. **-kirkjur**: Half-church.

The earliest examples of the term *hálfkirkja* or half-church are in *Auðunarmáldagar* compiled in and after 1318.² Although many of the charters in this collection may be copies of much older ones, there is no particular reason to believe that the term is much older. The charter collection is clearly the work of one mind - as argued in ch. I 3.6 - and conventions such as how to explain the amount of service required at a church, are the sort of thing likely to be introduced by a systematising scribe. The term is used frequently in 14th and 15th century charters, although it is less frequent than the full description. 'a church where mass shall be sung every other holy day'. As a scribal convention it was nevertheless gaining ground, so that by the late 15th century it was the predominant term for this type of church.³

² DI II, 426, 428, 429, 435, 439, 462, 472, 473, 479, 483, 485

³ Consider the charter of Tjorn in Vatnsnes (H) from 1318 where 'the priest shall sing . every other holy day at Illugastaðir' - DI II, 480-81,

¹ Helgi Skuli Kjarvaldsson 1989

heimaprestr *see* heimilisprestr

heimilisprestr, pl. -**prestar**: A priest attached to a household and its church. *See* þingaprestr.

hey-due *see* heytollr

heytollr, pl. -**tollar**: Hay-due. Paid to the priest for his travels inside his ministry.¹ Legislation regarding the h. is ill-preserved² and when it was introduced is unclear. Like the lighting-due it appears first in the mid 13th century and was well established when *Auðunarmáldagar* were compiled in 1318. H. are regularly mentioned in the northern charters, while charters from the southern diocese hardly ever mention them. Strangely enough the only examples are all from a small region at the northeastern end of Faxaflói (Akrair, Krossholt and Miklaholt (B)).³ Rather than meaning that h. were not paid in the southern diocese, this was probably due to different views towards the parochial system; in the North it was seen in terms of ministries while in the southern diocese it was understood as a network of churches. Although h. were supposed to go directly to the priest, in reality they were probably paid to the owner of the church where the priest resided, who instead gave the priest a horse and fodder when he needed. This had become formal in Víðidalstunga in Víðidalur (H) by 1394 when a charter for the church there states that: 'for the hay-dues the farmer shall give the priest a good horse to visit the sick and sing at annex churches in the ministry. The priest shall be responsible for the horse while he uses it.'⁴

home-field: = tún pl. tún. The fenced

field for hay-making around the farmhouses. The h. was normally the only cultivated (although not ploughed) part of a farm and it produced the best hay, which was given to the milch-cows. Hay of lesser quality from meadows was given to other cattle and sheep.⁵

homestead: = heimaland (sg.). A central holding of a larger property. The term implies an estate which was divided into a central holding and outlying holdings (*útlönd*). Such estates have not been the subject of study. The term became fossilised in charter language as a definition of the property where a church was situated.

householder *see* bóndi

hreppr, pl. **hreppar**: Commune. An association of at least 20 householders in a geographically continuous area. The h. organised certain common interests like summer pasture but its main function was to administer poor relief. *See* ch. III 2.3

hundrað, pl. **hundrað**: Hundred. Currency unit. 1 hundred = 120 ells.⁶

hundred *see* hundrað

höfðingi *see* chieftain

incapable person *see* ómagi

kirkjuprestr, pl. **prestar**: Church-priest. The term is used both of the servile priests described only in *Grágás* (see ch. III 5 1) and of priests who served in the church at major *staðir*, as opposed to the *þingaprestr* who served the annex-churches and ministered to the congregation.

kirkjusókn *see* sókn

Law court *see* alþingi

Law rock *see* Lögberg

lawman *see* lögmaðr

lawspeaker *see* lögsgumaðr

lighting-due *see* ljóstollr

ljóstollr, pl. -**tollar** also **lýsistollr**:

Lighting-due. L. seems to have been introduced by the middle of the 13th

whereas a version from 1360x89 has simply half-church at Illugastaðir' - DI III 169

¹ DI I, 596

² DI II, 292, DI III, 469-70II is the best on offer

³ DI I, 596, DI II, 113 DI III, 82, 86, DI IV, 189-90

⁴ [skal Bondi tyrrer heytolla lta prestu lærann hest j þingn til stakra manna og Burtsongs skal presturinn abyrgiast hestinn meðann hann ler med hann] - DI III, 538-40 Cederschiöld 1887 46-47, Björn Þorsteinsson 1974 454

⁵ Þorvaldur Þoroddsen 1908-22 III, 90-102, Schonfeld 1902 2-6

⁶ Magnus Már Lárusson 1958a, 1962b

century and was paid to church-owners for provision of candles and other lighting in the church.¹ A clause in the Christian Law section in *Staðarhólsbók* states that the church-owner is to pay for the wax needed for the church² which suggests that the due was introduced in the 13th century.

local leader (= *stórbóndi*). In the 13th century. A chieftain who normally did not own a *goðorð* and directly or indirectly acknowledged the authority of an overlord. Local leaders normally did not hold sway over larger areas than a single commune. **See also** chieftain.

Lögberg: Law rock. The place at the Alþing in Þingvellir from where the Lawspeaker directed proceedings at the assembly and where public announcements and speeches were made.³

lögbyli, pl. **lögbyli**: Independent farmstead. A political and geographical rather than strictly agricultural unit. More than one householder could own and work a l., and parts could be rented out as crofts or cottages.⁴

lögmaðr, pl. **-menn**. Lawman. Head of the Icelandic judiciary after 1271, presided over the Law court at the Alþing. Sturla Þórðarson was l. for the whole of Iceland in 1271-77 but after that date there were two l. in the country: one for the Southern and Eastern quarters and one for the Western and Northern quarters.⁵

lögsgumaðr, pl. **-menn**. Lawspeaker. President of the Alþing upto 1271. Elected by the Law court the l. was charged with knowing the law and directing the proceedings at the assembly. L. were normally of

chieftainly rank and were the only paid functionaries of the commonwealth.⁶

mark **see** mork

ministry **see** þing

mork, pl. **merkur**: Unit of measurement, 214/17 or 257/260 grams. As a unit of currency one m. equalled 8 ounce units.⁷

officialis: A priest or monk who governed a diocese in the absence of a bishop. The term is not attested until 1340.⁸

ounce unit **see** eyrir

overlord (= *stórhöfðingi*): In the 13th century. A chieftain whose authority was acknowledged by local leaders and who could hold sway over a whole region or parts of the country. **See** chieftain

ómagi, pl. **ómagar**: Incapable person. Any person, child or grown-up who was not capable of sustaining him- or herself and was therefore put in the charge of the nearest relative capable of providing maintenance. **See** ch. III 2.3.

parish **see** ministry and tithe-area

pauper **see** þurfamaðr

prestskyld: In charter language, the minimum property a church had to own to maintain a priest.

quarter. (= *fjórðungr*). The division of Iceland into four quarters was well established by the beginning of the 12th century. According to Ari the division dates back to the 960s when it was made as a part of a judicial reform. New courts were created, one for each quarter, where cases that were not resolved at the regional spring-assemblies could be resolved and where parties from different spring-assembly regions could meet for litigation.⁹ The quarter-courts were convened at the Alþing and represented the hub of its judicial activity.¹⁰

¹ NgL V, 35-36, Grg III, 144²⁰⁻²⁵, 191¹³⁻¹⁸, DI IV, 450-51 cf. DI I, 594, 596, 597 for the earliest datable examples. Finnur Jónsson translates this as *penso in candelas* - HE II, 95 and *penso in lumina* - HE II, 223

² Grg II, 19²²⁻²³

³ Grg III, s. v. lögberg, Matthias Þórðarson 1922, 80-94

⁴ Björn Lárusson 1967, 29-31

⁵ Jón Jóhannesson 1958a, 82-84

⁶ Jón Jóhannesson 1956, 66-68; Helgi Skuli Kjartansson 1986b, Jón Sigurðsson 1860

⁷ Magnús Már Lárusson 1958a

⁸ Magnús Már Lárusson 1967g

⁹ ÍFI, 12.

¹⁰ Ólafur Lárusson 1958, 100-118, Magnús Már Lárusson 1959h

region. Used here in a loose sense of a large geographically defined area, which normally corresponds to a single spring-assembly area. The court system divided the country into 13 spring-assembly areas, three in every quarter except for the Northern where there were four. In theory there were three *goðorð* in each spring-assembly area. In the southern quarter Rangárþing and Árnesþing were each one spring-assembly area. Kjalarnes is a geographically distinct r. but was part of the s-a area of either Árnesþing or Borgarfjörður south of the river Hvítá. Borgarfjörður was two s-a areas on each side of Hvítá which was also the boundary between the southern and western quarters Snæfellsnes and Dalir roughly corresponds to the s-a which convened in Þórsnes although the northern parts may have attended the Vestfirðir s-a in Þorskafjörður. Dalir can be considered a separate region from Snæfellsnes Vestfirðir corresponds a single s-a area, as do the r. of the northern quarter, Húnaþing, Skagafjörður and Eyjafjörður Þingeyjarþing was a single s-a area but is split into two geographical regions, the valleys stretching inland from the bay Skjálfandi and the more sparsely settled areas east of Tjomes peninsula, around Oxarfjörður, Melrakkaslétta and Þistilfjörður. The boundary between the northern and eastern quarters was along Langanes peninsula. The arrangement of s-a in the eastern quarter is obscure, but Bakkaflói and Vopnafjörður can be considered a single r. Hérað is another, and the perimeter of small fjords stretching from Njarðvík to Lón the third Hornafjörður and the thin line of settlement between Vatnajökull and the sea west of the river Skeiðará make up a single region. The last region of the eastern quarter corresponds to the modern administrative unit Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla.

skiptitíund. (sg) Tithe payable on property which amounted to more than 100 ounce units was divided in four, between bishop, priest, church and the poor. Tithe payable on less property was not divided but went exclusively to poor relief. See ch III 2.2.

sókn, pl. sóknir: *Sókn* originally meant 'movement towards' but relating to churches its meaning of 'attendance' is the cognate object of the verb *sækja*, meaning 'go to', 'attend' as in *sækja tíðir/messu/kirkju* = attend/go to mass/church.¹ It is as the cognate object of the verb *sækja* that s. occurs in the 12th and 13th centuries, normally in compounds like *kirkjusókn* = church attendance, or *tíðasókn* = service attendance (literally, attendance of the hours²), with no definite reference to territory, whereas by the 14th century s. and the compound *kirkjus.* had acquired a clear territorial sense and were used of the same kind of area as *þing*.³

sóknarkirkja, pl. -kirkjur: There was no specific term used for full-churches which had priests attached to them. In the charters they are simply called *kirkja* or church, while the term s. or parish-church is used in Episcopal statutes and secular legislation and seems sometimes to denote this kind of church. That usage however was probably based on Norwegian church-rank terminology, which was quite different from the Icelandic one. Until the 14th century the Icelandic understanding of the term is more likely to have been 'a church which is attended from a certain area' rather than 'the principal church of a parish' which was the Norwegian understanding that later (probably in the 15th century) became

¹ *Sókn* has the derived meanings 'advance, attack, prosecution, coming, jurisdiction, parish, fishing hook'. It is related to Old English *socn* 'search, attack, parish' from *secan* 'seek, visit, attack' from which the modern words 'seek', 'beseech' and 'ransack' are derived. OGNs s v 'sókn', Ásgeir Bl. Magnusson 1989 s v 'sókn', 'sækja' Jørgensen 1980: 34, Bnnk 1990: 68-74. The earliest example of *sókn* in a possible territorial sense is AB, 148₁₆ from around 1300.

² *Tíðir* is a translation of the Latin *horae* and is found both in that meaning but usually it has a more general sense of all the services a priest gave in his church (i.e. mass and hours), see Smedberg 1973: 195-99.

³ In Grágas and in 14th century documents the word *hérað* (district) is also sometimes used in the same meaning as *þing*, Grg Ia 14₁₈ (= II, 16₁₄), Ia 15₁₁ (= II, 17₁₀, III, 31₄₇) - DI II, 526₁₆, 805.

accepted in Iceland. There is a strong possibility that *s.* was understood simply as a church with a specific congregation, and the term can therefore have been used of any lesser church which had tithes payable to it and was attended from a specified number of farms or a defined area.¹

Spring assembly *see* *vorþing*

staðr, pl. **staðir**: In the Treaty of Ögvaldsnes in 1297 a distinction was made between churches which owned more than half of the farm where they stood and those which owned half or less. The former came under direct control of the bishops, while the latter continued to be under lay control. In late medieval documentation a clear distinction is made between a *s.* or benefice which owned more than half of the farm where it stood and *bændakirkja*, literally 'farmers' church' which owned half or less. A *s.* was normally on good farmland, owned much additional property and rights and was central to ecclesiastical organisation in its area. Many were the seats of ecclesiastical dignitaries and sometimes powerful secular allies of the bishops. The *bændakirkjur* on the other hand were more humble institutions, normally much less wealthy and the priests who served at them were nearer the bottom of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

These distinctions are important in the late middle ages but in the 12th and 13th centuries the term *s.* was used to refer to any church which owned a sizeable property as well as monasteries and the episcopal sees.² The use of the term was flexible but it seems always to refer to churches which owned more than one farmstead and at least half the homestead. Churches which only owned a *prestskyld* were not *s.*

The original meaning of *s.* is 'place', 'location' and it is interesting that in Brittany the Latin term *locus* is used in the same way for ecclesiastical institutions and in Wales it is found as a place-name element denoting a monastery.³

stórbóndi pl. *stórbændr* *see* local leader and chieftain

stórhöfðingi *see* overlord and chieftain

tithe area: The farmsteads from which tithe was paid to a particular church. Annex-churches normally had their own t. although such areas often included only the farmstead where the annex-church was situated.

útkirkja, pl. **-kirkjur**: Annex-church. Any church which did not have a resident priest and more service than a chapel. There were three main types of *ú.* according to the amount of service given. The terms *alkirkja* or full-church, *hálfkirkja* or half-church, and *ffjórdungskirkja* or quarter-church, are clearly coined with reference to the number of services given in each; mass was sung every legally prescribed holy day in full-churches, every other in half-churches and every fourth in quarter-churches. These terms are used consistently in this meaning in the records of Hólar diocese, and on their basis it could be argued that 48 masses were sung at half-churches every year and 24 at quarter-churches. The number 48 is only rarely stated, and mostly in later charters,⁴ but as charters of half-churches consistently set down the priest's fee as 2 marks (96 ells), it can be safely assumed from the formula that one mass cost 2 ells⁵ that this was the number being thought of. We could also note the consistency in the usage of the term quarter-church in the inventory of 1486-87⁶ for churches at which earlier

¹ Examples could be Guðlaugsvík in the ministry of Eyn in Bitra (SD) - DI II, 409-10 and Kirkjuból in the ministry of Eyri in Skutulsjörður (V) - DI II, 699-700.

² Magnus Stefánsson 1975 76 points out that the term is used for churches which owned only half of the homestead, but then proceeds to use it as a technical definition of proportion of ownership

³ Davies 1978 36; Pierce 1984 487

⁴ Eg Fagríðalur in Skarðsströnd (SD) 1491\1518 - DI VII, 72, Brekka in Saurbær (SD) 1523 - DI IX, 195-96, and Jorfi in Haukadalur (SD) 1521\41 - where the connection is made clear '48 masses shall be said there every other holy day' DI IX, 193-94

⁵ Cf DI III, 469

⁶ DI V, 352-57

charters state that 24 masses were to be sung, and 'half' must be double that of 'quarter'. This would imply that 96 masses were sung yearly at full-churches but there is no direct evidence for this and it is likely that these figures were thought of more as approximates to simplify the calculation of the priest's fee. For one thing, there simply cannot have been a fixed number, because the number of feast days which fell on Sundays varied as did the number of feast days which coincided with festivals of the seasonal calendar. This would also have affected the number of masses sung at half-churches, as the definition given in the charters is almost invariably 'every other holy day' - and not the actual number - which must be taken to mean that the number varied according to the liturgical calendar.¹ The same should be true of quarter churches, if the term is taken at face value.

varðveizla: Charge. The responsibility which the caretaker of a church took for it. The responsibility amounted to an undertaking to rebuild the church in case it was destroyed or when it had become too dilapidated for services to be given in it and a promise not to alienate or squander the church's property. The term is a symptom of the introduction of *ius patronatus* in Iceland in the last quarter of the 12th century. See also *forráð* and ch. III 3 4

vorþing, pl. **vorþing** Spring assembly. Assemblies held in May for each region. In theory one spring assembly was convened by three *godorðsmenn* and attended by their followers/farmers of the region. The main task of spring assemblies was to settle disputes which arose within the

¹ In a few cases the charters of half-churches name several feast days in addition to the 'every other day' and this could suggest that normally feast days were not celebrated at half churches, but that would render the phrase 'every other legally prescribed day' meaningless and it is more likely that these additional days were intended as an extra night either because of local or patron's preferences and/or to allow for some permanence in the celebrations at the church in question, DI II, 667-68, 770-71, 787, DI III, 110-11, 338-39, DI IV, 39-40, 58, 84, 116, 131-32, 234-35, 592, DI IX, 195, cf. DI I, 407, DI II, 396

region but they could also pass legislation on matters such as prices. Spring assemblies figure prominently in some of the sagas of Icelanders but by the 13th century they do not seem to have been a regular feature of political or judicial life.

þing (pl.): Ministry. The area and churches within it served by a single priest. A *þ* normally consisted of the tithe area of the church to which the priest was attached and several smaller tithe areas of annex-churches.

þingaprestr, pl. **-prestar:** District priest. A priest hired on annual contracts to serve a church and its annex-churches. See ch. III 5.3 and III 5.4. The term can also be used of the priest who serves the ministry as opposed to the (senior) *kirkjuprestr* whose duties were only at the church to which both were attached.

þingbrekka: Assembly slope. A slope or hillside at any assembly where announcements were made. Corresponding to the *Lögberg* at the *Alþing*.²

þingfararkaupsbóndi, pl **-bændur** Assembly-tax-paying householder. Assembly-tax was payable by all householders who owned a minimum property requirement. *Þ*. took turns in following their chieftain to the *Alþing* and those who stayed at home paid the tax for the travel expenses of those who undertook the journey.³

þingmaðr, pl **-menn:** Follower. A *þingfararukaupsbóndi* who followed a certain chieftain. A chieftain's *þ*. were his constituency; they could be his social equals

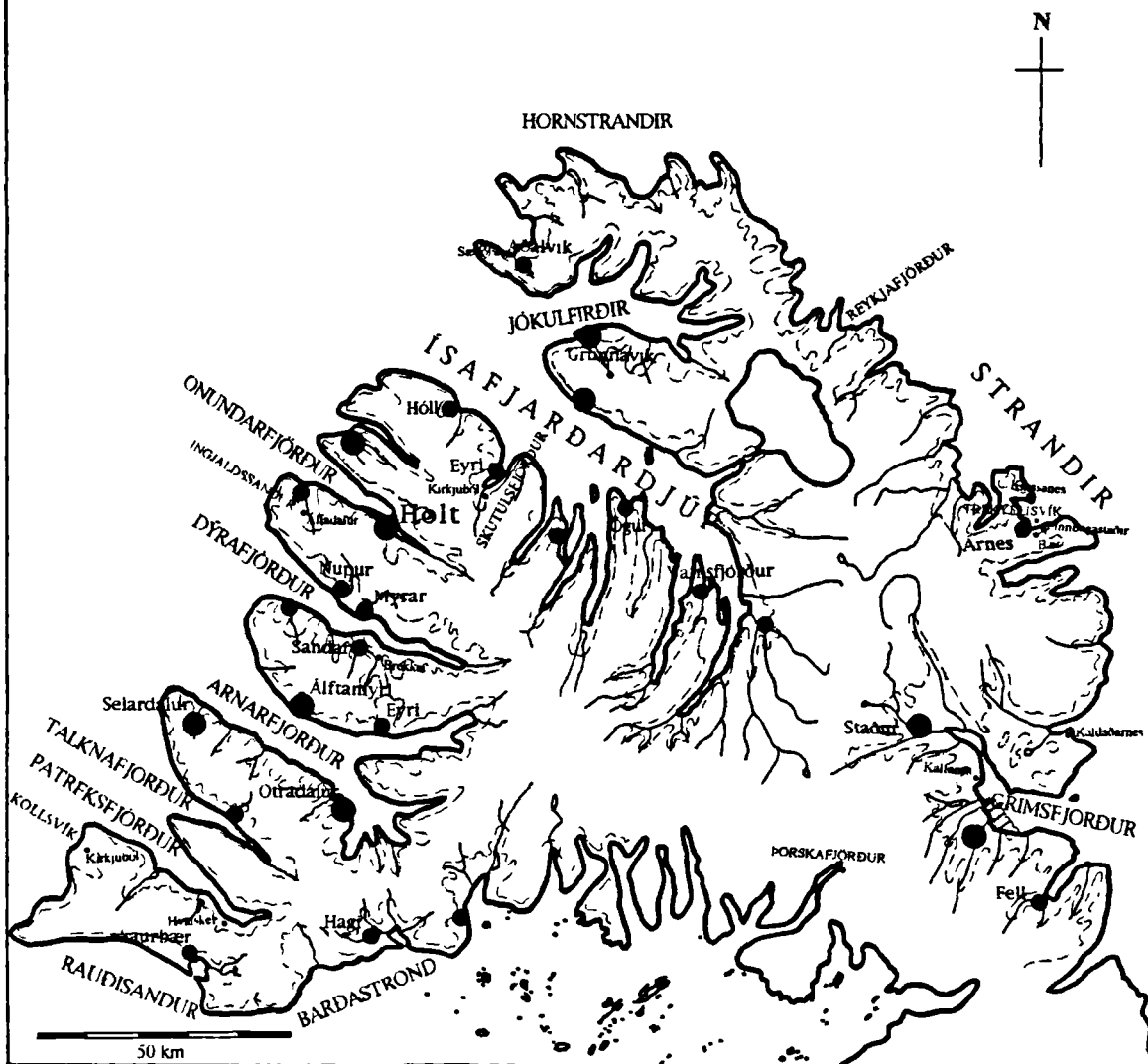
þurfamaðr, pl. **-menn:** Pauper. A householder who received support from other householders in his commune. A quarter of the tithe was collected by the commune and distributed by its officers for this purpose. See ch. III 2.3.

² Grg III, s v *þingbrekka*.

³ Grg III, s v *þingfararakaup*

MAPS

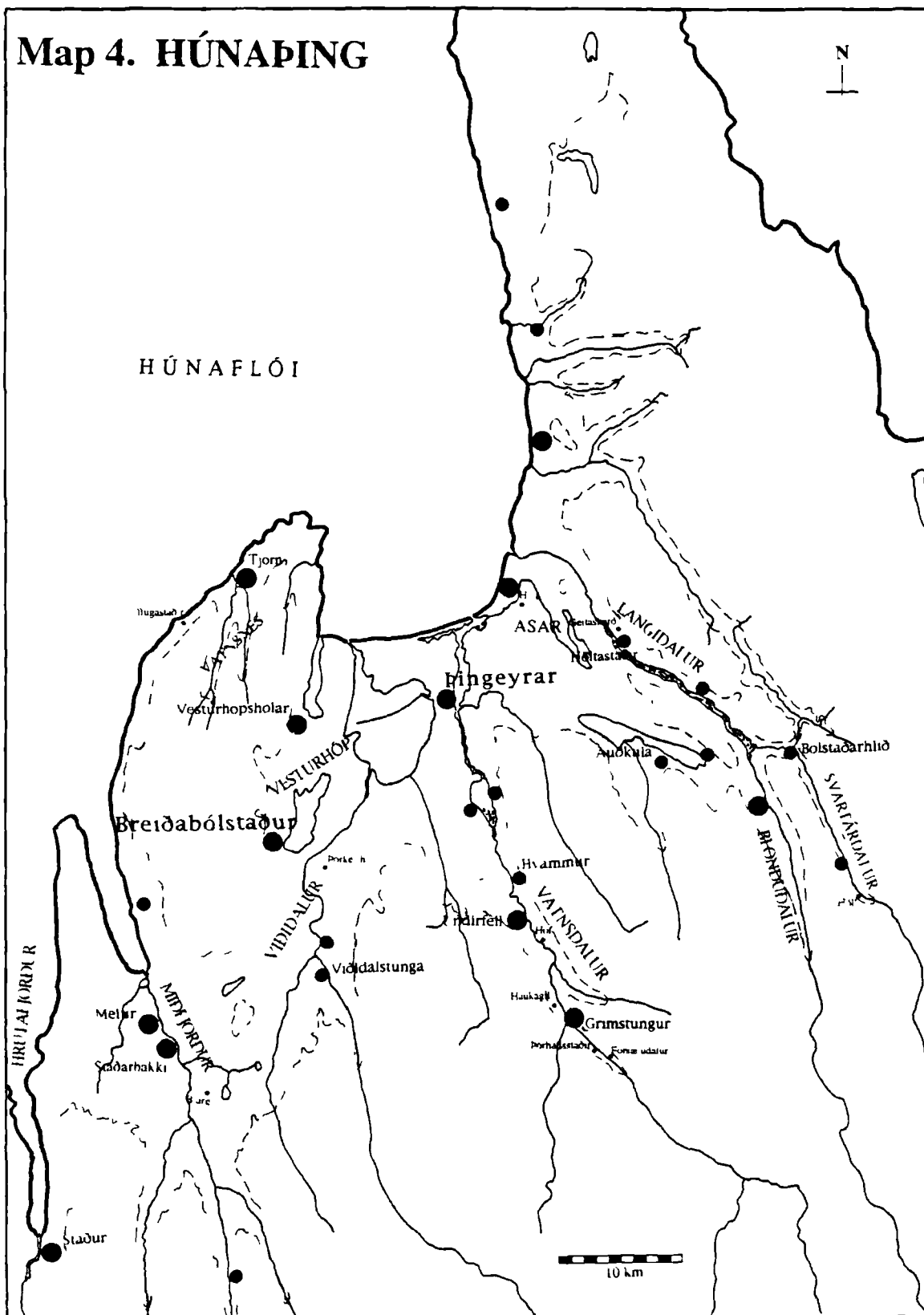
Map 3. VESTFIRDIR

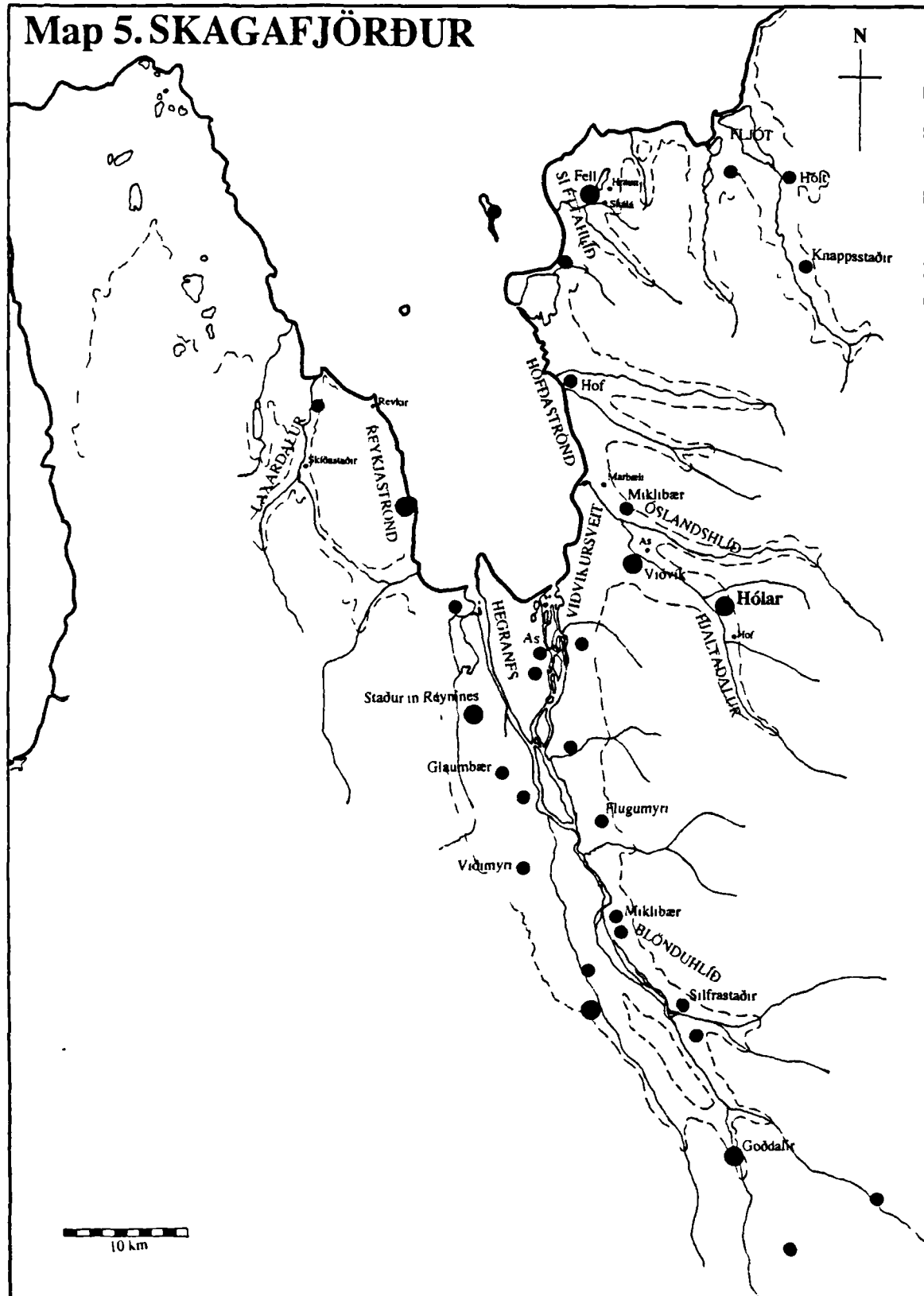


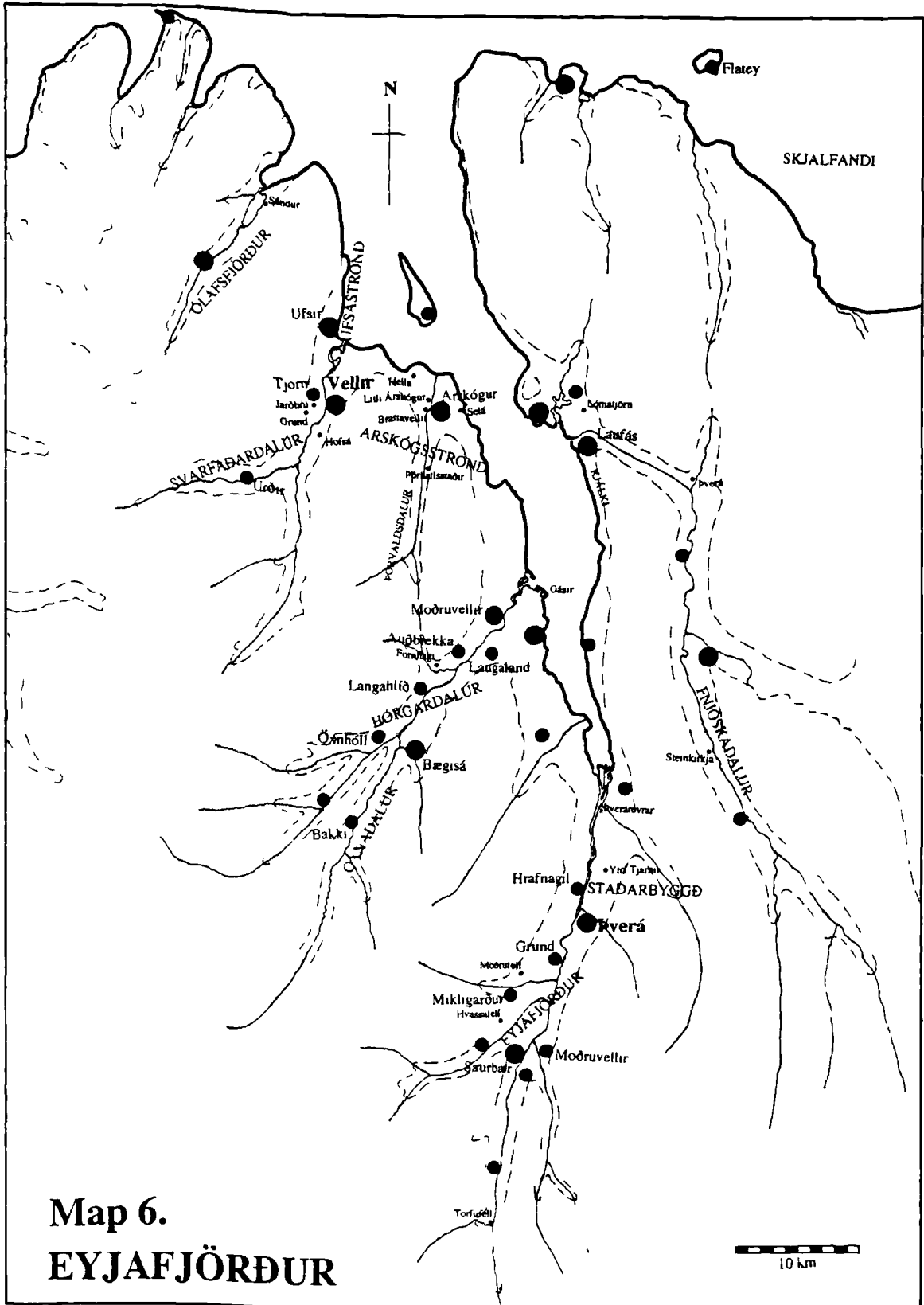
Legend

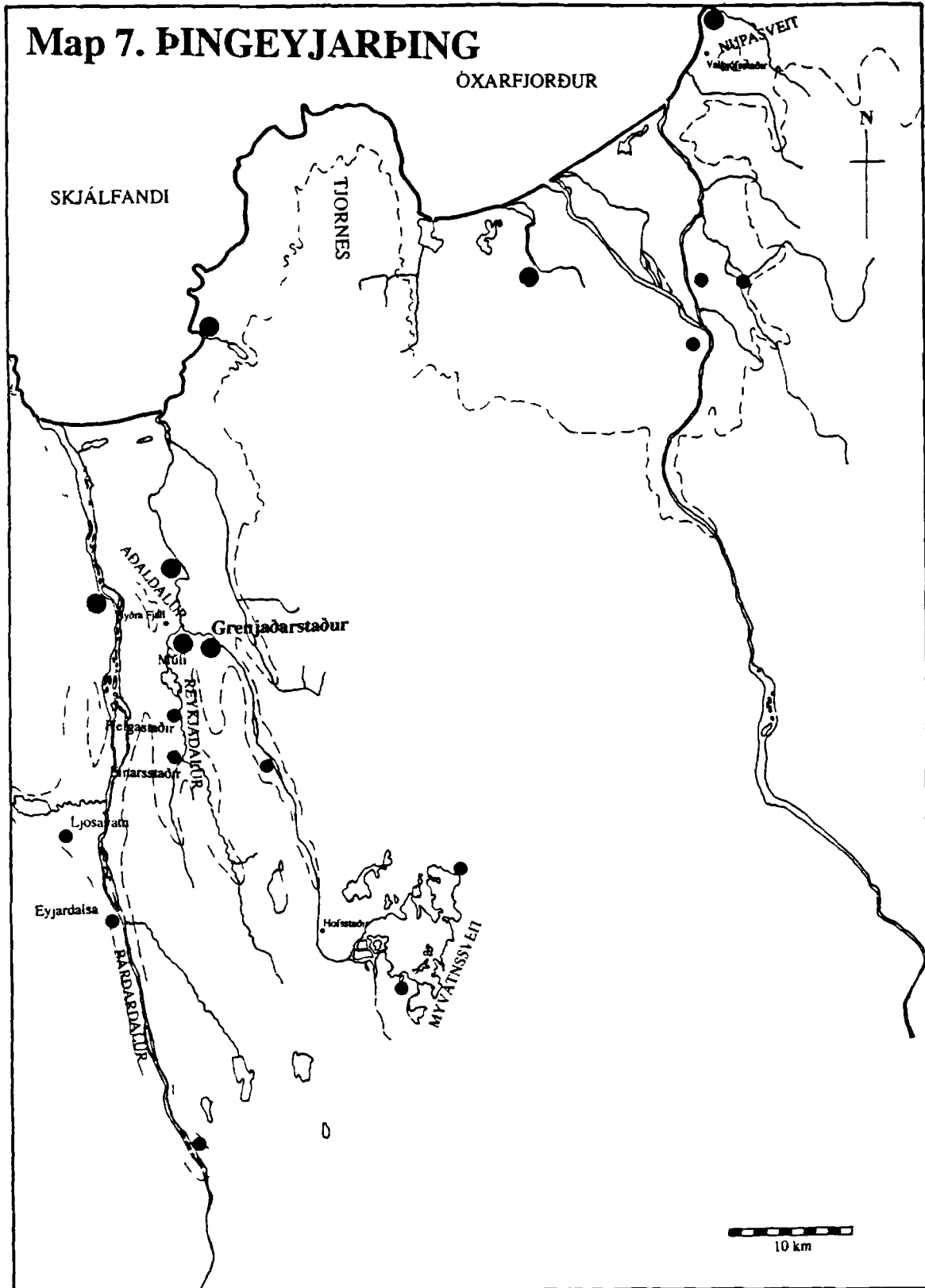
- Húsafell **Vellir** Major church (*staðr* or monastery)
- Hrafnagil Other church (*bændakirkja*)
- Syðra Fjall Annex-church, chapel or farm mentioned in the text
- FLJÓTSHLÍÐ District-name
- 200 m countour line

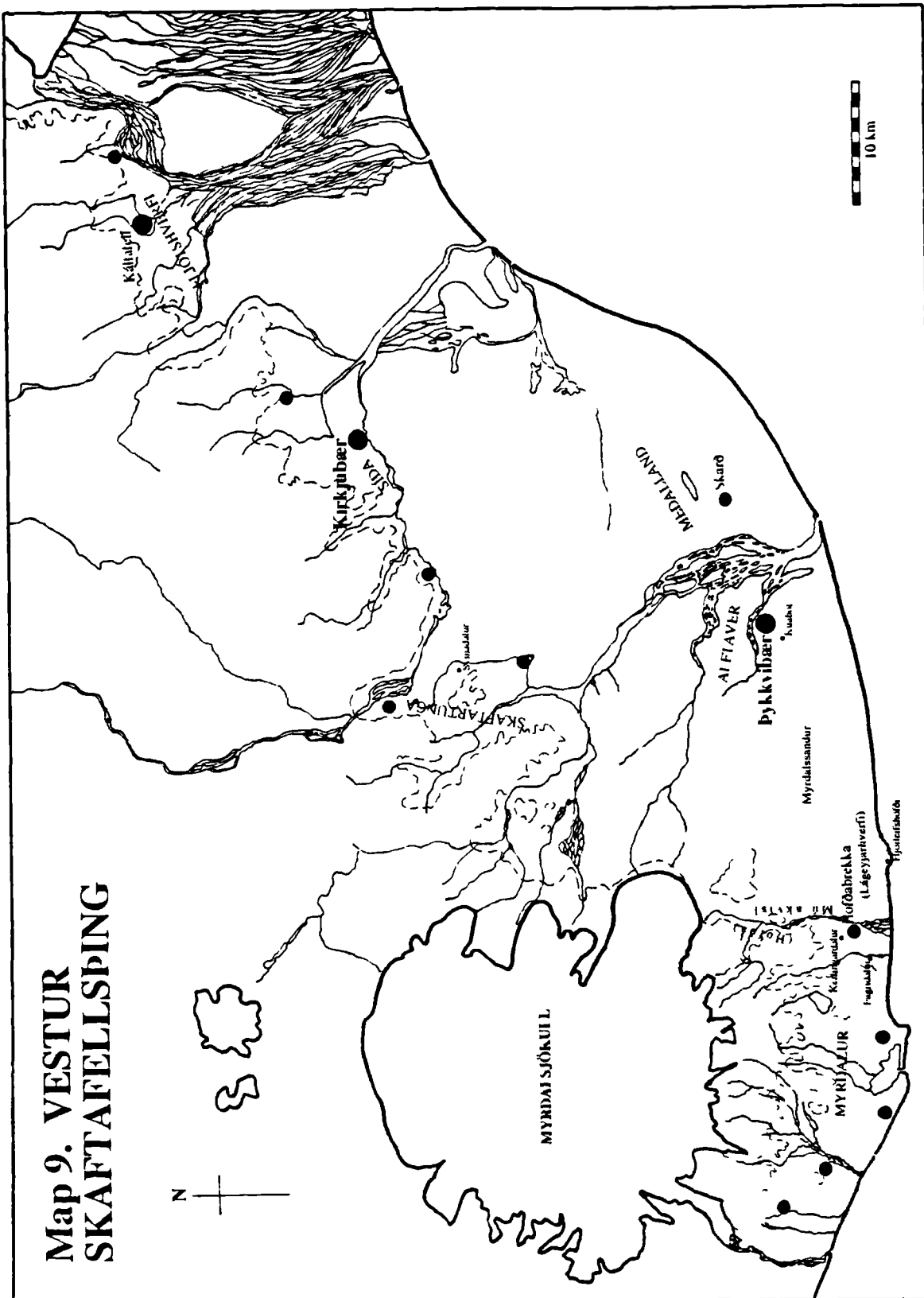
Note the smaller scale of map 8 and the correspondingly smaller symbols.



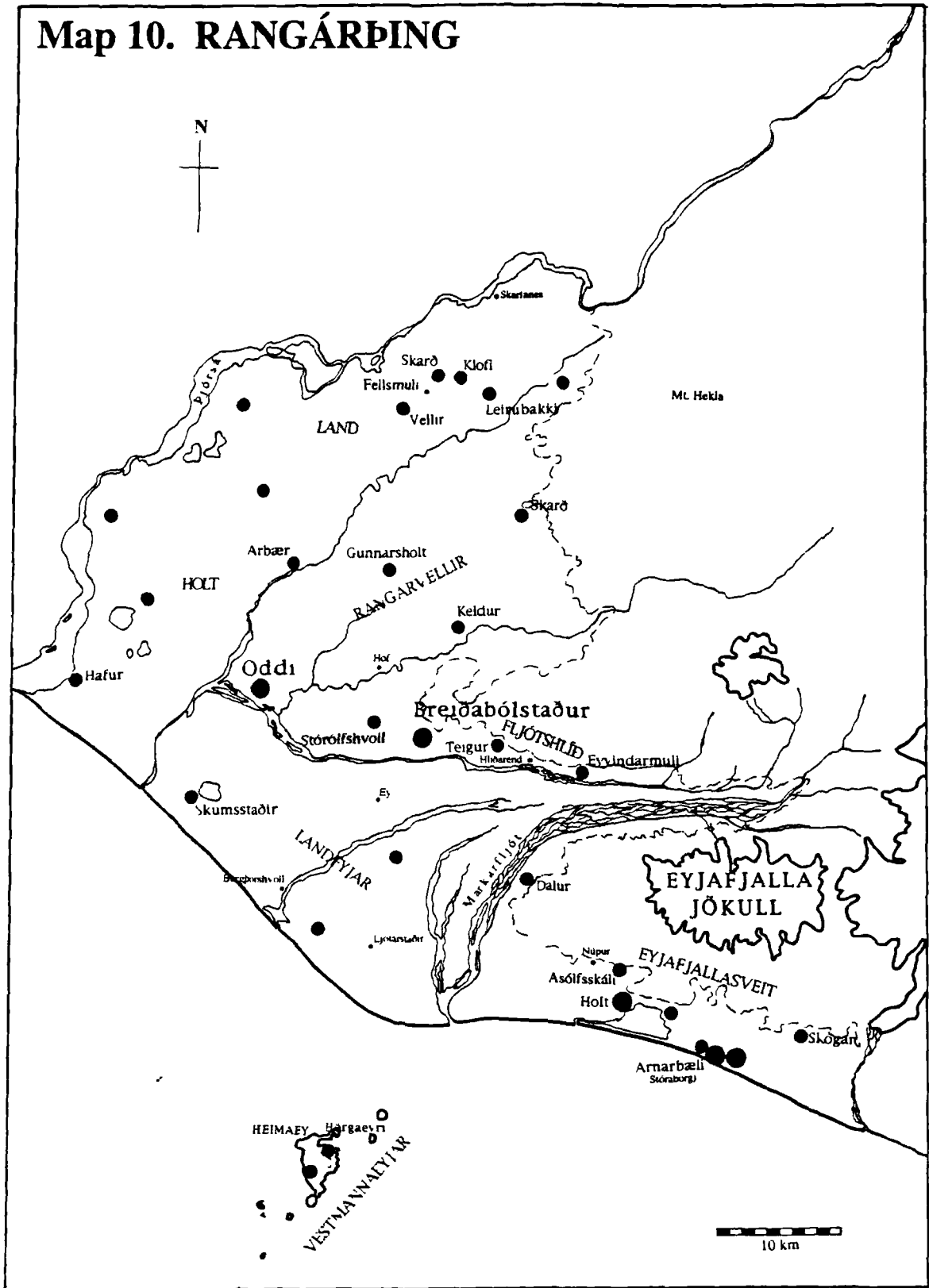


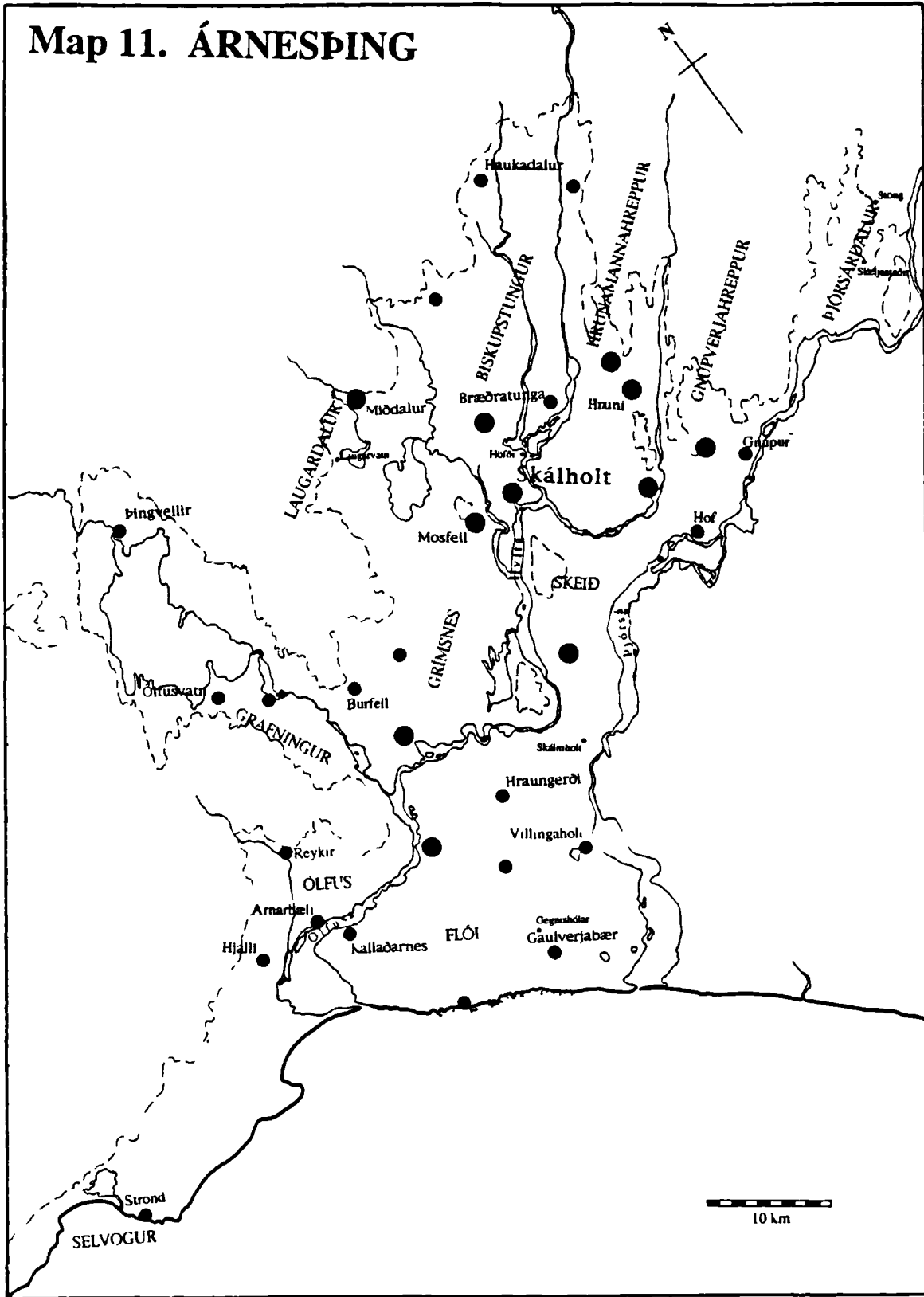


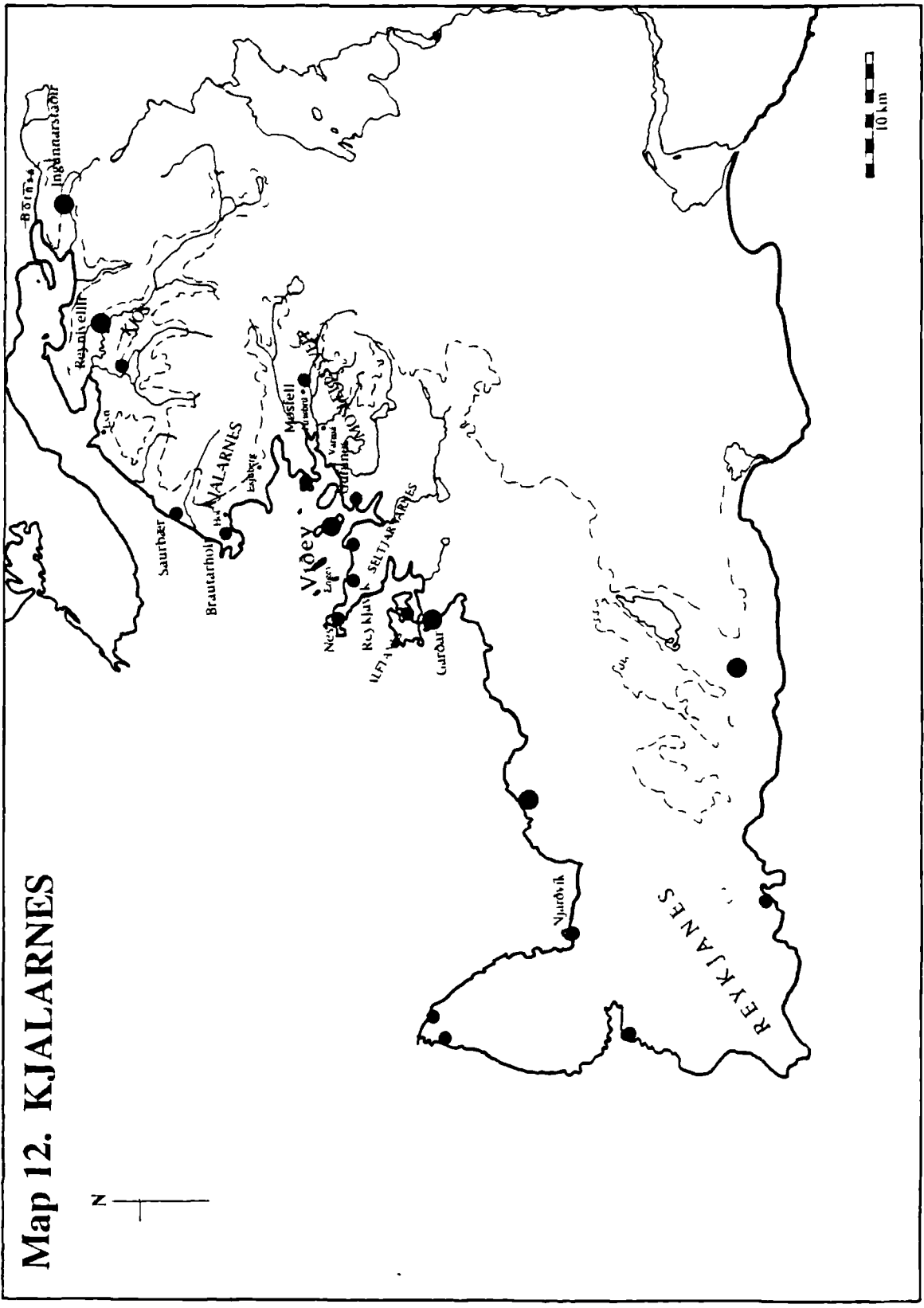


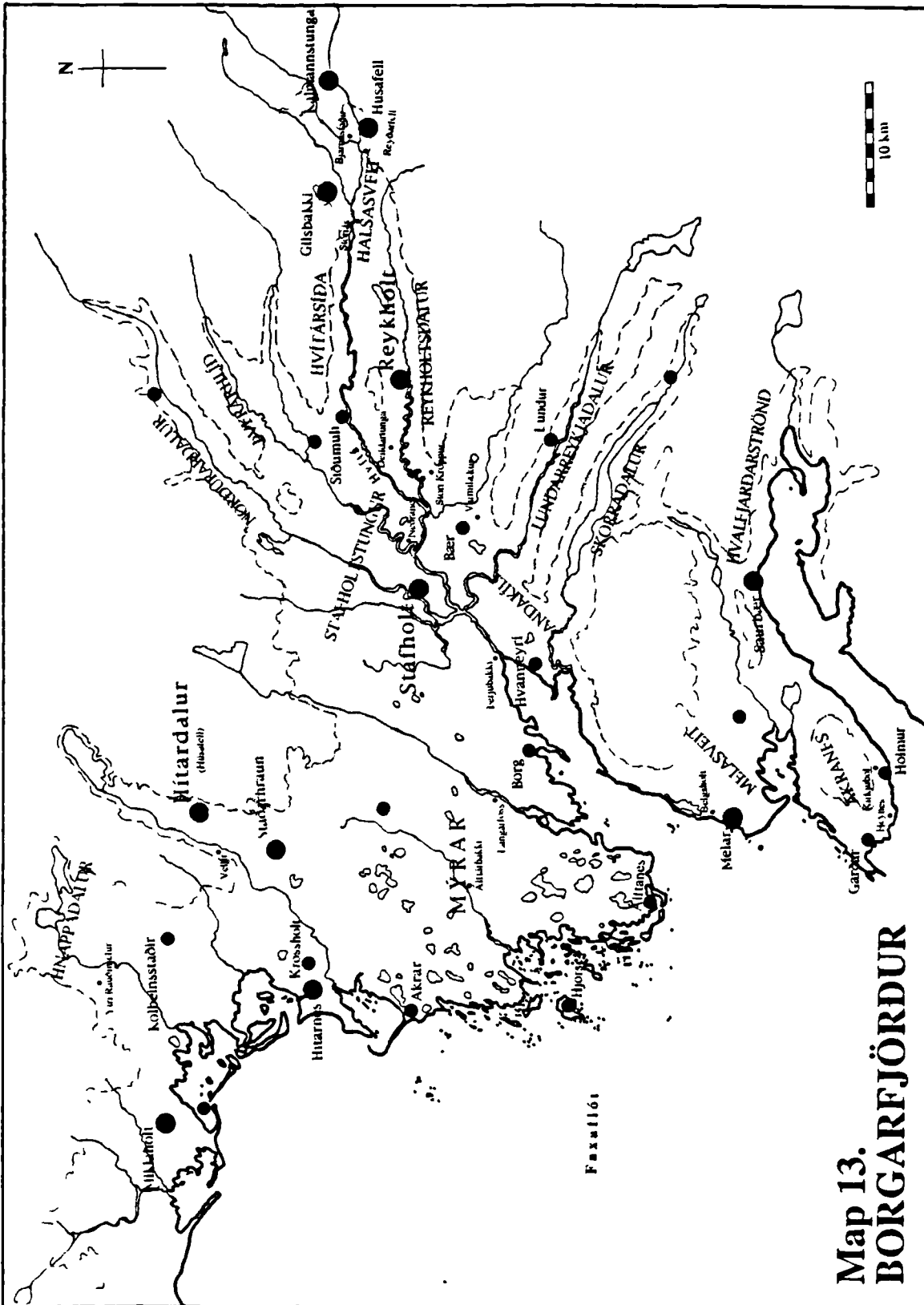


Map 10. RANGÁRÞING

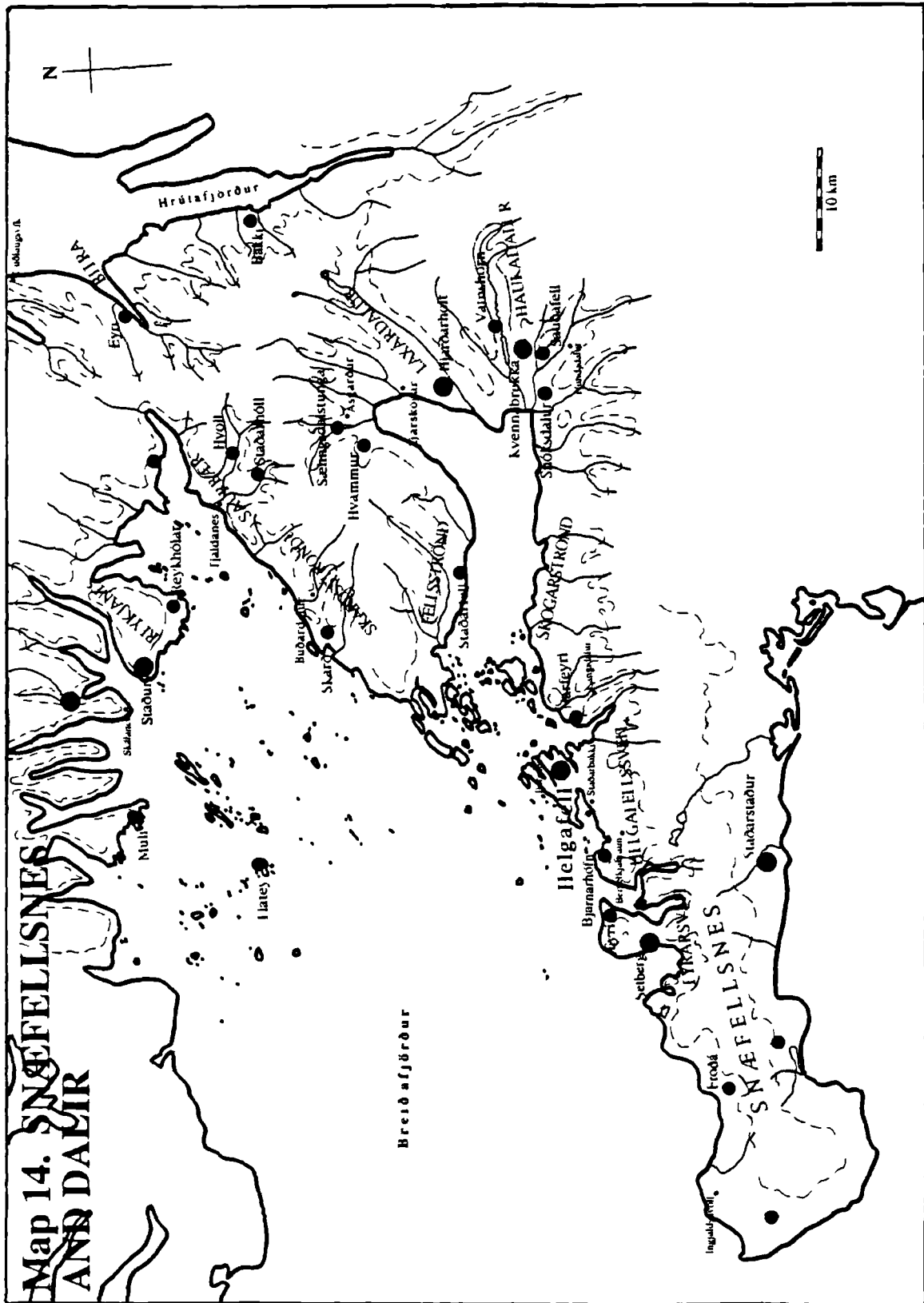








Map 13.
BORGARFJÖRDUR



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For abbreviations see p. 6

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a á b c d d e é f g h i j k l m n o ó p q r s t u ú v x y ý z þ æ ø å

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