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GUÐMUNDR ARASON:
A CLERICAL CHALLENGE TO ICELANDIC SOCIETY

The Icelandic Commonwealth exhibited, particularly during the Friðaröld, a unique social balance and a unique harmony of secular and clerical interests. It was more than coincidence that it was in the Friðaröld that learned Icelanders laid the foundations of a unique literary culture. Against this background, no one could view the collapse of the Commonwealth in the 1260s as other than a tragedy. The one inevitable fact of history is change, and the fall of the Commonwealth was at least in part caused by long-term changes in the nature of Icelandic society. Perhaps the same set of changes both enabled the saga writers to take their penetrating look at Icelandic society and brought the political independence of that society to an end. Though no single historical change is inevitable, we might sometimes feel that changes for the worse are more nearly inevitable than others. The historian's task is then merely to explain how changes come about. But with possibly more than the normal human share of censoriousness, historians regularly seek to apportion blame for those changes which they regret. At least three distinct forces are generally held to have contributed to the fall of the Icelandic Commonwealth - the rivalries among the goðar, the large claims of the Catholic church (for whom the Archbishop of Nidaros acted as spokesman), and the ambitions of kings of Norway. The historian can subject these forces to innumerable permutations. Anyone, for instance, who wishes to think well of the goðar, can point to what looks at first sight like a sinister coalition of Norwegian royal and clerical imperialism. My purpose in this paper is less to attempt an overall apportionment of responsibility for the fall of the Commonwealth than to suggest that one man has, both explicitly and implicitly,

been saddled by historians with more than his fair share of whatever blame is appropriate. He was Guðmundr Arason, bishop of Hólar.

Guðmundr occupied, for good or ill, a central place in the Iceland of his day. This is reflected not only in the existence of the several variants of his own saga, but also in the prominent place given to his career in Sturlunga saga.[1] The manuscript tradition of this material is complex enough to delight any textual critic, but not complex enough to obscure one striking historiographical paradox: modern historical opinion, which in the main is hostile to Guðmundr, is based on a set of sources that range, in the main, from an attitude of neutrality towards him to a strong partisanship in his favour. Every historian, in utilising a literary source, is at perfect liberty to base upon it a viewpoint at variance with that taken by his source. But this reading between the lines will expose a student of Guðmundr's career to two dangers. The first is undue use of hindsight: we know that Guðmundr's undoubtedly stormy career was shortly followed by the fall of the Commonwealth; and hence there is a temptation to use post hoc ergo propter hoc arguments. Secondly, there is the danger of anachronism. Guðmundr undoubtedly fell foul of the goðar; and since there are more modern politicians who resemble the thirteenth-century goðar than there are modern clerics who resemble the thirteenth-century militant churchmen, we may get Guðmundr badly out of perspective. The real danger is not of failing to see him as his supporters did, but of failing to see him as thirteenth-century Icelanders in general did.

Let us note some modern opinions about Guðmundr. In the late eighteenth century, Bishop Finnur Jónsson adhered to what we may

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1) Guðmundar saga manuscripts are listed in Ole Widding, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, L.K.Shook, C.S.B., 'The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose: A Handlist', Mediaeval Studies, xxv. (1963), 294 - 337, at 312-13. The handlist refers to relevant critical studies published up to that date: see also ed. Stefán Karlsson, Sagas of Icelandic Bishops (Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile, vii. København, 1967), 9-43.

call the Jekyll and Hyde view of Guðmundr, the pious-priest-turned-calamitous-bishop, that still tends to be the orthodox view.[2] The learned Finnur remembered the verdict of Tacitus on the Emperor Servius Galba - 'omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset'. After his elevation to the office of bishop, Guðmundr angered the goðar and pleased no one else, except his own worthless followers and anyone who cared to believe in his miracles. In his time (and presumably through his actions), church and state in Iceland drooped:

> Vir omnium judicio officio par, nisi id gessisset. Nam ante id omnibus carus, venerabilis, imo mitissimus in populo suo publice et privatim audiebat. Eo autem suscepto, omnibus invisis et contemptus existebat, imo omnium rigidissimus habebatur. Vix dimidium longi satis temporis, quo officio praefuit, intra suam dioecesin mansit, sed plerumque extra eam, ut exul et omnium indigus, inutilem et subinde nequissimam secum trahens sodalitatem, mendicorum more oberravit. Plurimis saepissime sumtui et taedio, paucis vero (nisi quibus miraculorum patratione subvenisse credebatur) et gregi quidem suae curae commisso minimo fuit usui aut emolumento. Cum Magnatibus continua exercebat odia, quos non, ut debuit, sapientia et lenitate in ordine continere, aut aberrantes reducere, sed dirarum et devotionum et rigore terrere et frangere, frustra saepe conabatur... Nec unquam adeo, tam religio et status ecclesiae, quam politia et status reipublicae, ac ipso sedente, in dioecesi Holensi vacillavit.

We may freely admit that Guðmundr displayed much more 'enthusiasm' than would be thought seemly in an eighteenth-century cleric, and Finnur's typical Enlightenment side-swipe at miracles is in itself sufficient indication of the gulf of feeling between the two bishops.

In the late nineteenth century Eiríkr Magnússon had, as we shall see, a special motive for stressing the inflexible and doctrinaire nature of Guðmundr's conduct of his office.[3] To him Guðmundr was a fanatic who insisted on his view of church-state relations 'blindly', backed only by 'a rabble of lawless vagabonds',

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2) Bishop Finnur Jónsson, Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae (København, 1772-8), i. 359-60.

3) ed. Eiríkr Magnússon, Thómas Saga Erkibyskups (Rolls Series: London, 1875-83), ii. pp. xii-xxvii.

and 'against almost all the best men in the country'. In the 1920s Knut Gjerset did not perhaps find Guðmundr very interesting, and in just over a page took him from being the new bishop, 'very self-willed and arbitrary' to the last days when he was 'old and blind, and despised by all respectable people'.[4] At the same period Finnur Jónsson the literary historian saw Guðmundr as 'denne trodsige biskop, der mere var biskop af navn end gavn...' Again the 'følge af stoddere' make their appearance. And Finnur seems slightly ungenerous in describing the bishop as 'stadig görende jærtegn' and yet 'efter sin død - ufortjænt - dyrket som helgen'.[5]

In the 1920s also, another Icelandic bishop, Jón Helgason, delivered his verdict on Guðmundr.[6] He stressed the danger of applying historians' hindsight to Guðmundr's career, and insisted on his piety and catholicity. But with regard to Guðmundr's political impact on Iceland, he wrote:

> Að sjálfsögðu hafði Guðmundur sína bresti og var í mesta máta háður hleypidómum sinna tíma. Og því verður ekki heldur neitað, að ýmsar athafnir Guðmundar góða urðu útsæði baráttu og blóðsúthellinga, svo að jafnvel mætti segja, að framkoma hans hafi orðið til að kveikja hið ægilega ófriðarbál Sturlungatímabilsins og undirbúa þá viðburði, er hér gerðust 1262 og '64.

In 1942 Turville-Petre and Olszewska published an excellent English translation of Guðmundar saga, working basically from AM 399, 4°, the Codex Resenianus.[7] Their verdict was that Guðmundr's career was disastrous for his diocese, 'and no less disastrous to Iceland as a whole'. Three authoritative reviews of their book did not dissent from this conclusion. To Stefán Einarsson, Guðmundr

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4) Knut Gjerset, History of Iceland (London, 1922), 163-5.

5) Finnur Jónsson, Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie (2nd edn, København, 1920-24), ii. 763.

6) Bishop Jón Helgason, Kristnisaga Íslands (Reykjavík, 1925-27), i. 125-29.

7) G. Turville-Petre and E.S. Olszewska, The Life of Gudmund the Good, Bishop of Hólar (Coventry, 1942).

symbolised 'the forces of Christianity in their most uncompromising form, a form which was to prove fatal to the Old Icelandic Commonwealth'.[8] Halldór Hermannsson saw him as 'stubborn and uncompromising' and possessing 'neither administrative ability nor any conception of financial matters'.[9] Gwyn Jones characterised Guðmundr as 'a gifted but refractory leader', and to this historian and critic of wide sympathies the bishop was a 'far from sympathetic character'.[10] John C.F.Hood, an English churchman, in 1946 liked Guðmundr personally but agreed that he had been historically a disaster: if celibacy had not been one of his principles, a wife might have 'kept him from eccentric aberrations'.[11] And to Professor Peter Foote Guðmundr was 'that pitiful and disastrous man'.[12] We may conclude this section of largely hostile opinion by quoting two recent Icelandic historians, Jón Jóhannesson[13] and Björn Þorsteinsson.[14] Most recently of all, Björn has not been unduly severe on Guðmundr. But he does characterise him thus:

> Hann var hugsjónamaður, en lítill flokksforingi og stjórnmálaleiðtogi; lagði þegar í upphafi leiks allt undir fyrstu atlöguna og tapaði.

Jón Jóhannesson, however, provided in the 1950s a most forceful modern version of the traditional case against Guðmundr. Some of his comments are as follows:

> ... ófriður og óstjórn þróuðust allt í kringum hann. Einkum urðu deilur hans örlagaríkar að tvennu leyti. Hann virti aldrei landslögin og átti drjúgan þátt í að brjóta niður virðingu manna fyrir lögum þjóðveldisins... [It was partly his fault] að Íslendingar misstu að lokum sjálfstæði sitt. Loks efldi hann hjátrú og hégilju í landinu meir en flestir aðrir. Það er því ekki ófyrirsynju, að Guðmundur biskup hefur verið kallaður einn hinn óþarfasti maður í sögu vorri.

Finally, following the lead of Bishop Jón Helgason, Jón Jóhannesson

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8) Stefán Einarsson in Germanic Review, xx. (1945), 153-4.

9) Halldór Hermannsson in Speculum, xix. (1944), 259-60.

10) Gwyn Jones in Medium Aevum, xiii. (1944), 67-8.

11) John C.F. Hood, Icelandic Church Saga (London, 1946), 99-105.

12) Peter G. Foote, 'Sturlusaga and its background', Saga-Book of the Viking Society, xiii. (1946-53), 207-37.

13) Jón Jóhannesson, Íslendinga Saga (Reykjavík, 1956-8), i. 249-50.

14) Björn Þorsteinsson, Ný Íslandssaga (Reykjavík, 1966), 266.

made one particular point about Guðmundr in the context of Icelandic-Norwegian relations, to which we must return later.

Making a selection of scholars, and a second selection among their relevant views, may have led me unconsciously to bias my picture. But I think it is fair to say that for these scholars, and others, Guðmundr was a BAD THING for Iceland (to use the phrase that some older history text-books for schools are supposed to have used, when they felt the need to oversimplify). Many of the writers quoted are generous in praise of Guðmundr's piety, his loyalty to friends, his vigour and endurance. But he emerges from their pages as at best a man dwarfed by his office at a period in Iceland's history when it was crucial that he should measure up to it, at worst the man who threw his country into the turmoil that permitted effective Norwegian intervention. Halldór Hermannsson sums up, succinctly and fairly, what I take to be the consensus view of the result of Guðmundr's claims for clerical immunities:[15)]

> The struggle proved in the end fateful for the independence of the country, because it gave the archbishop of Nidaros and, ultimately, the king of Norway, opportunity to interfere in the internal affairs of Iceland, although in the end the erratic bishop was disavowed by the archbishop.

It has been an artificial exercise on my part to construct this composite case against Guðmundr, and it would be more artificial still to proceed to labour its internal inconsistencies: Guðmundr the helpless victim of circumstances too big for him, Guðmundr who had such a positive, if baleful, historical effect. Let me freely concede that the indictment is formidable.

Certainly there have been contrary voices. In 1907 W.P. Ker began with the robust belief that a worthless man was unlikely to inspire such a good saga.[16)] He then answered a question of his own as follows:

> But can it be said that he did much, or anything, to hasten the fall of the Republic, the dissolution of the healthy old Icelandic Commonwealth? Probably not. We have a very full account of the particulars of life in Iceland in those days, and we know that it did not need the questions of ecclesiastical policy to set

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15) Halldór Hermannsson, loc. cit.

16) W.P. Ker, Collected Essays (London, 1925), ii. 152-72 reprints his 1907 address to the Viking Society on 'Gudmund Arason'.

people fighting.

In a sensitive article published in 1967, Régis Boyer depicts Guðmundr as 'le meilleur témoin de son temps... Miroir ou fruit de son époque, et certes point cause ou fauteur de ruine'.[17] Finally there is the individual stance adopted by Einar Ól. Sveinsson.[18] He is not uncritical of Guðmundr, a fanatic and 'an idealist with his eyes closed to the reality around him'.[19] But as usual, Einar's pages convey such a concrete sense of personal encounter with Guðmundr that amid his strictures we may glimpse the essential grandeur of our bishop more readily than amidst encomiums from a less perceptive writer.

This brings us back to the original sources. No reading of them, however careful, could disprove the majority view of modern scholarship. But a reading may suggest alternative perspectives. The material for Guðmundr's early life is clearly the testimony of those who knew and loved him. It is certainly tempting to see the hand of Lambkárr in this, the protégé who was 'staddr...við marga funde ok marga lute síþan, þá er ero í þesse sögo',[20] a man who, when he was deprived of the opportunity to be Bishop Guðmundr's secretary,[21] may have resolved to bide his time until he could set the record straight for posterity. For Guðmundr's later life we are mainly in debt to Arons saga and to Íslendinga saga. The first is a

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17) Régis Boyer, 'L'Évêque Guðmundr Arason, Témoin de Son Temps', Etudes Germaniques, xxii. (1967), 427-44.

18) My references are to Jóhann S. Hannesson's translation of Einar Ól. Sveinsson's monograph, entitled The Age of the Sturlungs, and published at Ithaca, N.Y., in 1953 as volume xxxvi of the series Islandica. (Cited hereafter as Einar Ól. Sveinsson).

19) Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 115.

20) Biskupa Sögur, i. 461. My references are to the edition published in København in 1858-78 by Hinu Íslenzka Bókmentafélagi: this work is cited hereafter as BS.

21) BS, i. 475-6.

favourably biased story about a man himself favourably biased towards Guðmundr.[22] If the Sturlung family had adhered to one party line, and if its historian-members had written in that spirit, then Íslendinga Saga might have afforded us a source hostile to Guðmundr. But Sturla Þórðarson was an objective historian, and in any case for internal family reasons Sturla Þórðarson apparently did not feel compelled to associate himself with the point of view of his cousin Sturla Sighvatsson, the enemy of Guðmundr. We may feel that Abbot Arngrímr's mid-fourteenth-century life of Guðmundr should not be asked to bear too much weight as historical evidence. It is a late source, and a frankly hagiographic one: but as such it would surely be an odd literary memorial to a man who was in any way considered to have encompassed his country's ruin.

In any case, modern saga scholarship may sometimes be able to dissect the sources and determine the bias of each portion, but it does so by means of starting with the sources in the form in which we have them. The mere fact of compilation of a composite narrative of Guðmundr's life, such as we have in the Codex Resenianus, tells us a lot about attitudes. In this case someone in the mid-fourteenth century compiled an account of Guðmundr's life, basing it, except in the case of Arons saga, largely on much earlier materials. The majority view of modern scholars would require us to read this recension as a story about a man who evolved a splendid system of private morality which after 1203 turned out to be a totally disastrous system of public morality. Now the writers of samtidssagaer[23] may have been more like historians or journalists than historical novelists. But it seems hard to accept that the compiler of the Codex Resenianus had so little regard for literary consistency that he would have been satisfied with an essentially broken-backed narrative. It seems

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22) See John Porter, 'Some Aspects of Arons Saga Hjörleifssonar', Saga-Book of the Viking Society, xviii. (1970-), 136-166.

23) I follow Sigurður Nordal's classification in 'Saga-litteraturen', Nordisk Kultur, VIII B (Stockholm, Oslo and København, 1953), 180-273.

easier to believe that, having sought our sympathy for Guðmundr as priest, he did not expect Guðmundr as bishop to forfeit that sympathy.

Very early in the Codex Resenianus, which will be our main guide through Guðmundr's life, we are nudged towards taking a very positive attitude. Guðmundr karlhǫfði hears the infant Guðmundr cry:[24)]

> hann lézt engis barns rödd slíka heyrt hafa, ok kvaðst hann víst vita, at þat barn munde verða afbragð annarra manna, ef lífe hélde, ok kallaðe sér bjóða ótta mikinn er hann heyrðe til.

This is not the infancy of a weakling, a mere victim of circumstances. Swiftly thereafter, two possible paths in life are adumbrated for Guðmundr. He can follow the path of compromise, as exemplified by his grandfather Þorgeirr at the Alþing in the grjótflaugarsumar of 1163:[25)]

> 'Nú hafa þat kennt hinir göfgustu menn, at leggja skylde vandrǽðe öll en auka eige.'

Or he can follow the path of loyalty to principles and friends, as his father Ari does, in dying for Jarl Erlingr. The Jarl stresses the heroism required in making such a choice:[26)]

> 'varð hann einn búinn til af yðr öllum, at gefa sjálfviljande sitt líf fire mitt líf.'

We are left feeling that if the lusty infant finally makes the wrong choice he will make it for the right, heroic, reasons. And we are not led to expect that he will choose compromise. Those responsible for the fatherless boy's education soon find him 'ólatr mjök',[27)] (sic; ?ólátr), a phrase which, like the Scots adjective 'thrawn', seems capable of carrying the connotation of cussedness in pursuit of a good cause, and which could be applied to the early life of many saga heroes.

Another formative experience for Guðmundr is his shipwreck, and even more his recovery from the injury to his foot. It is not merely that he never thereafter permits any possible remaining physical weakness to impede a life that is peripatetic through

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24) BS, i. 410.

25) BS, i. 412.

26) BS, i. 414.

27) BS, i. 416.

choice as well as often through necessity. It is also that the saga singles out his time of recuperation as the time when:[28)]

> þóttust menn mestan mun á hafa fundit, at skiptist skap hans... ok kom þaðan af nokkut við á hverjum misserum til siðbótar honum ok skilníngar, at náliga þótte hann allr maðr annarr í atferð sinne, en fyrst þótte áhorfast, er hann var úngr.

Already, and in important ways, Guðmundr begins to diverge from some at least of the heroic laymen of the sagas. His upbringing is in an unmistakably bookish and intellectual milieu. Uncle Ingimundr grieves at the shipwreck:[29)]

> þá þótte honum hart um höggvast, því at þá var farit ynðe hans er bêkurnar vóro farnar, en maðrenn sá meiddr, er hann unne mest...

What scholar might not feel with some uneasiness that an ironic comment is implied here on an intellectual's order of priorities?

But above all the account of Guðmundr as young man and young priest leaves us with an impression of his piety. If that piety has awkward consequences, they are above all awkward consequences for Guðmundr himself. His refusal to hurry over mass seems in part at least the cause of the disastrous night on the moors.[30)] But as he lies in the snow, protecting the children in his care, we sense his readiness to endure all the consequences of his own actions. This sense of responsibility, this physical and moral quality of endurance, are the key-note of his life. The important early criticisms of his piety are not directed at its consequences for others, but for himself:[31)]

> Hann görðest þá mikill trúmaðr í bênahalde ok tíðagerð ok harðrétte ok örlête, at sumum mönnum þótte halda við vanstille, ok êtloðo, at hann munde eige bera mega allt saman, harþlífe sitt ok óynðe af andláte Þorgeirs.

In its essence, Guðmundr's brand of piety is far from complex, and it is wholly attractive. It is extraordinarily difficult to determine how far a man of Guðmundr's type and generation saw himself as continuing the work of earlier pious Icelanders, and how

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28) BS, i. 431.

29) BS, i. 423.

30) BS, i. 442.

31) BS, i. 430.

far innovating: too much of what we know of the earlier Icelandic church was written by men of Guðmundr's own day, who may conceivably have coloured the past with their own innovatory aspirations. The saga provides one clue that men like Guðmundr knew they were innovating:[32)]

> Marga lute tók hann þá upp til trú sér, er enge maðr visse áðr, at né einn maðr hafe gert áðr hér á lande...

Elsewhere, however, there is evidence that men like Guðmundr may have thought, rightly or wrongly, that they were operating within a tradition of Icelandic piety. If we take Hungrvaka as representing the 'objective learning' of the Skálaholt school as opposed to the 'breathless hagiography' of Hólar,[33)] it provides such evidence. Bjarnharðr enn saxlenzki as we are told:[34)]

> vígði marga hluti... kirkjur ok klukkur, brúr ok brunna, vöð ok vötn, björg ok bjöllur, ok þikja þessir hlutir hafa birt sanna tign hans gæzku.

We may suppose that Bjarnharðr's primary aim was to provide clear proof of Iceland's sanctity, and it is in this that Guðmundr, a cleric in perpetual motion, seems to follow him. The topography of Iceland is to be made the topography of God's kingdom on earth, and surely Guðmundr would have wholly approved Ólafur Lárusson's attempt to state with maximum precision just what was accomplished.[35)] It would not be unduly cynical to suggest that Guðmundr was right if he believed that Iceland, in terms of personal piety as in terms of the church's place in society, was still short of perfection. A century after the tithe law of 1096 had enshrined the dual role of the goðar, the church must have been a basic part of ordinary folk's lives: it may also, in unfortunate ways, have become everyday and mundane.

There was plenty of coarse-grained scepticism around, as at Reykjahólar when people urinated in the well just consecrated by Guðmundr.[36)] His saga does not encourage us in the belief that he

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32) BS, i. 431.

33) See G. Turville-Petre, Origins of Icelandic Literature (Oxford, 1953), 202.

34) BS, i. 65.

35) Ólafur Lárusson, 'Guðmundur góði í þjóðtrú Íslendinga', Skírnir, cxvi. (1942), 113-39.

36) BS, i. 457.

was an otherworldly ascetic unable to meet such people on their own ground. Some of his outstanding qualities are seen when he tells the old woman:[37)]

> 'guð vakte þik, systir, ok vilde eige at þú svêfir um messona svá nêr altare'.

and when he deals with the boy who pretends to have no clothes to wear.[38)] On such occasions he showed a kindliness, a tact, a sense of humour, a gift for human sympathy, that rightly made him a hero of ordinary Icelanders. At times we are compelled to see in the sagas of Guðmundr a certain quality surely emanating from the historical Guðmundr himself: this is a quality of holy simplicity quite astounding in our jaded and sophisticate age. Már Finsson sees a little bird fly up from Guðmundr's shoulder: but, says the saga-writer, Már Finsson[39)]

> þóttist eige vita, hvat fugla þat var, því at hann var óvanr at seá heilagan anda.

And this holiness seems to have enabled Guðmundr to engrave himself on the folk-memory, to localise holiness in the very soil of Iceland as he would have wished. The story goes that once, while he was busy on Drangey, blessing it and casting out trolls, he established an understanding with even the trolls. W.P. Ker retells the story as follows:[40)]

> In his purification of the island, which was carried out very thoroughly, he was let down by a rope over the cliffs to bless them. At one place a shaggy grey arm in a red sleeve came out of the rock with a knife, and cut two strands of his rope; the third strand was hallowed and would not give, and the Bishop hung there. Then a voice from the rock said: 'Do no more hallowing ,Bishop; the Bad Folk must live somewhere.' The Bishop had himself hauled up, and left that corner as a reservation for trolls, so it is said.

Before we examine Guðmundr's career as bishop, it is necessary to discuss two failings he is said to have had, two disqualifications

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37) BS, i. 438.

38) BS, i. 599-600 (AM 657c,4°).

39) BS, i. 436.

40) W.P.Ker, op.cit, 172. See also Ólafur Lárusson, op.cit., 132-3.

for the rôle: firstly, his supposed intellectual rigidity in matters of theory (which must be discussed at some length), and secondly his supposed incompetence in practical matters.

It would not be unreasonable to describe Guðmundr as an intellectual called to play a part in politics: scholars, as if in a collective acknowledgment of their own limitations, tend to hold such people in contempt. It is true that Guðmundr did hold undeviatingly to certain theoretical positions regarding the relations of church and society in Iceland. It is true that he must have formulated these positions in the context of knowing what churchmen were trying to do in other parts of Europe. This knowledge must have been based more on reading than on first-hand experience, since he was not as far-travelled as some previous bishops. And we can certainly associate him with a deliberate campaign of practical and literary propaganda in favour of his ideals. But none of this amounts to saying that his practical politics were inflexibly dictated to him by what he had read, or had inspired others to write.

The church throughout western Europe was in the late twelfth century taking the initiative on what it considered its rights: church control of church property, and clerical immunity from lay courts, were key demands. The first of these issues was raised in Iceland by Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson of Skálaholt. We have no reason to suppose that he would have raised the issue merely because of prompting from Nidaros, had he thought it inappropriate to Icelandic conditions. For younger clerics like Guðmundr, the career of Þorlákr had a double lesson: he had done what he could and, as Lucien Musset puts it 'il échoua entièrement.'[41] Turville-Petre and Olszewska characterise Þorlákr as 'wise and temperate'.[42] To give up a struggle for principle once begun is not in itself proof of wisdom and temperance; to give up a hopeless struggle may

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41) Lucien Musset, Les Peuples Scandinaves au Moyen Age (Paris, 1951), 215.

42) G. Turville-Petre and E. Olszewska, op. cit., xv.

be, and Þorlákr was in a better position to gauge the strength of opposition than are later historians. But Jón Loptsson had personal qualities as well as social status to make him respected, something which was hardly true of some of Guðmundr's adversaries. In an ultimately decisive intervention in Icelandic affairs for which Guðmundr cannot be held responsible, the archbishop of Nidaros had in 1190 forbidden the goðar to enter the priesthood. There was some prospect now that the Icelandic church would be administered less in lay interests. And in this context it was not through mere disinterested piety that Guðmundr and others determined in the following years to keep Þorlákr's memory alive. The campaign to give Skálaholt a saint began four years after Þorlákr's death in 1193 - and began in the diocese of Hólar. As soon as people began to have visions confirming Þorlákr's sanctity, Ormr, former chaplain to Þorlákr and now in the north[43]

> sende þegar rit um vitronina Guðmunde preste Arasyne, því at þeim hafðe orðit áðr rétt um helgina Tholáks biskups, ok segir Guðmundr prestr Orme preste, at Thorlákr biskup var hinn helgaste maðr...

In 1199 the Alþing declared Þorlákr a saint: when his relics were translated:[44]

> Guðmundr prestr réð mesto, hvat súngit var, þá er heilagr dómrenn var upp tekinn.

One man not particularly active in the business, at least at the start, was Bishop Páll of Skálaholt, Þorlákr's nephew and Jón Loptsson's son. His slowness to insist on his uncle's sanctity may have arisen from seemly modesty about his family, but perhaps also from a realisation of the use to which militant churchmen might put his uncle's cult. And so more than care for Páll's personal feelings may have been involved in the playing down of the dispute about proprietary churches in the first version of Þorláks saga. Bishop Páll, married, a good host, and with a habit of conciliating goðar, was a churchman more to the taste of Bishop Finnur Jónsson than was Guðmundr. Indeed, he may remind us of Finnur's portrait of Steinn Jónsson of Hólar (1711-39), a man

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43) BS, i. 451.

44) BS, i. 455.

noted for not annoying government officials, and a representative figure of a period not marked by particularly high morale in Icelandic church or society.[45]

The priests of Hólar may have taken pious delight in the events of 1199 and yet sensed that they were now at a tactical disadvantage.[46] As Professor Jón Helgason puts it:

> The new saint was, of course, of great importance in consolidating and extending the influence of the Skálaholt episcopal see.

And it was a moot point whether Skálaholt under Páll would use this advantage aggressively enough. Jón adds:

> ... there was some doubt at first as to what bishop should be chosen for a saint [in Hólar]

Significantly he does not imply that there was doubt whether one should be chosen at all. In March 1201 the formal translation of the bones of Bishop Jón Ǫgmundarson of Hólar took place. Since Bishop Brandr was ill he required a deputy to conduct this service, and his chosen deputy was Guðmundr. It was Guðmundr, too, who delivered the exhortation needed to convince the Alþing of Jón's sanctity.[47]

In the first years of Guðmundr's bishopric, and at his instigation, a life of Jón was written by Gunnlaugr Leifsson, monk of Þingeyrar. Jón had been dead eighty years, and tradition did not allow Gunnlaugr to be too circumstantial in detailing Jón's piety.[48] But if I describe Guðmundr and Gunnlaugr as propagandists, I do not mean that they were crude or unscrupulous in their methods. The surviving Icelandic versions of the Latin life of Jón do not suggest that they were given to fabricating material to further the aims of the church militant.

Guðmundr sought the backing of foreign churchmen for his policies as bishop, and in the end found their qualities of endurance not equal to his. In a similar way he found inspiration in

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45) Bishop Finnur Jónsson, op. cit., iii. 749-50.

46) ed. Jón Helgason, Byskupa Sǫgur (Corpus Codicum Islandicorum Medii Aevi, xix : København, 1950), 12.

47) BS, i. 459-60.

48) ed. Jón Helgason, op. cit., 13.

the lives of foreign saints but no doubt did not expect to apply without modification the lessons of their lives to the church in Iceland. As an editor of Thómas saga erkibyskups, Eiríkr Magnússon had a proper respect for that work. But he lacked sufficient warrant for the assumption he made that lives of Becket were the manifestoes that determined Guðmundr's every action as bishop.[49] We know that Guðmundr's friend Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson held St. Thomas Becket in special veneration, and Eiríkr made the happy suggestion that Hrafn may, on his return from England in around 1197, have presented a Latin life of St Thomas to the future bishop. Perhaps he did, and perhaps it was the life by the elusive Robert of Cricklade.[50] But that is all we have to go on, and it is not much. Undoubtedly Guðmundr knew a lot about Thomas, and approved of him. But we do not know how often Thomas was in his thoughts: the fact that echoes of Thomas saga abound in the Guðmundr material is proof of the saga's literary rather than of its political influence. Thus we have the vision of Rannveig, where three prestigious Scandinavian saints appear and Guðmundr is flatteringly compared to Thomas.[51] And there is uncle Þorvarðr's dream, which led him to tell Guðmundr:[52]

> ek hefe svá drauminn ráþit, at vegr þinn munde svá vera mikill, at öll kristne munde eige hyggja mega...

This echoes an incident before St Thomas's birth where his mother's dream is interpreted:[53]

> at meiri mundi verda dyrd ok uirding þessa burdar, er hon geck med, enn iardlig kristni mætti med taka ædr skilning æa koma.

Both Þorvarðr and St Thomas's mother dream that they have difficulty getting through a door. The incident comes more naturally in Thomas saga, since the saint's mother has the excuse of pregnancy.

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49) ed. Eiríkr Magnússon, op.cit., xii - xxvii.

50) Margaret Orme, 'A Reconstruction of Robert of Cricklade's Vita S. Thomae Cantuariensis', Analecta Bollandiana, lxxxiv. (1966), 379-98, and sources cited there.

51) BS, i. 451-4.

52) BS, i. 473-4

53) ed. C.R. Unger, Thomas Saga Erkibyskups (Christiania, 1869), 298.

More pertinent for the historian, one might feel, is the stanza composed by Kolbeinn Tumason, embarked on the quarrel with Guðmundr that proved fatal to Kolbeinn:[54)]

Guð hefir Guðmund gjörvan
glíkan Tóma at ríki,
nær liggr okkr við eyra
erfíngi höfðíngja:
ræðr guðs laga geymir
geðbjartr snöru hjarta,
hræðist himna prýði
hann, en vætki annat.

This is a contemporary verdict on Guðmundr, but again the context is literary. Kolbeinn, whose attitude to his theme is either that of grudging admiration or that of heavy irony, in any case evidently intended his simile to startle. Readers were invited to compare Guðmundr's pretensions with those of Thomas, and the stanza is not evidence that Guðmundr thought of himself in these terms.

The Thomas-Guðmundr parallel has obsessed historians unnecessarily. The two churchmen certainly agreed on the need to keep the clergy out of the civil courts. They quite possibly had a common attitude to the question of martyrdom, but not the one often attributed to them. Scholars have sometimes expressed surprise that Guðmundr was lucky enough to escape martyrdom, and have followed this with the surmise that as a result he must have been a disappointed man.[55)] The first point is a legitimate expression of opinion, the second an unwarranted one. Guðmundr had his share of physical courage, but he does not seem to have gone out of his way to court martyrdom. But then neither, on the whole, did St. Thomas. Where the parallel is most open to question is in the theory of a volte-face performed by both men in mid-career. St. Thomas had been chancellor of England, and Henry II had some excuse for being surprised at the 'high churchmanship' of a former head of the civil service. But a period of residence with Kolbeinn Tumason surely did not bind Guðmundr to an equal degree to be, as bishop, a spokesman for the goðar. Both King Henry and Kolbeinn misjudged their man, but that

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54) BS, i. 491 footnote.

55) Stefán Einarsson, loc. cit.

is not the point.

Unprofitable fun could be had with an Ambrose- Thomas-Guðmundr parallelism. St Thomas in a letter to Henry II compared himself to St Ambrose, who had excommunicated the Emperor Theodosius.[56] Certainly, Guðmundr had a fondness for Ambrose, whose feast had been established in Iceland, as a result of one of Guðmundr karlhofði's revelations, when Guðmundr Arason was young.[57] And when Guðmundr Arason hesitated on the threshhold of the episcopal office, he was reminded how, as a boy, he, like Ambrose, was always singled out in games by his playmates to play the bishop.[58] Guðmundr later broke with Gunnlaugr Leifsson over Ambrose, but for no very political reason: Gunnlaugr had written a new story about Ambrose, but Guðmundr protested that the old life by Pope Gregory was more appropriate for use in church.[59] Guðmundr on one occasion quoted, following Ambrose, the dictum that 'to the pure all things are pure' (allt er h[r]einum ok trúföstum hreint, en óhreinum ok trúlausum er[u] allir hlutir óhreinir).[60] Again, this is not to say that he saw himself as St Ambrose. Indeed, he seems to have found examples of female piety equally inspiring. Abbot Arngrímr's life of Guðmundr contains materials on the visions of the nun Elizabeth of Schönau, which, it has been suggested, had been sent to Guðmundr by a correspondent in the Cistercian house of Tautra on Trondheimsfjord.[61] And one of Guðmundr's pithiest comments invoked the Virgin Mary herself. As a bishop-elect deprived by Kolbeinn of the control of his own household, he is visited by the steward.[62] The steward wonders why the food at Christmas has lasted a week longer than usual. Says Guðmundr:

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56) C.R. Unger, op.cit., 392.
57) BS, i. 420.
58) BS, i.473.
59) BS, ii. 77 (Holm 5 fol.).
60) BS, i. 576 (AM 657c, 4°).
61) ed. Stefán Karlsson, op.cit., 36-7, and sources cited there.
62) BS, i. 477.

'því er svá, sonr minn, at Maríu þikkir betr at veitt sé en Kolbeine'.

Guðmundr would have been a split personality indeed if he had identified himself directly with everyone he admired. And while he was certainly the intellectual he has generally been assumed to have been, he was in addition sometimes very adroit in applying the ideas of pious literature to everyday life.

The steward's enquiry brings us now to the question of Guðmundr's business sense, or lack of it. This is a complex question, and a simple answer, that Guðmundr was incompetent in practical matters, has too readily been assumed. As a young priest, it is true:[63]

hvert vár fór því fram, at eytt var kaupe því öllo, er hann tók, ok gaf þat til matar ok klêða fátêkum mönnum ok frêndum sínum, ok vóro þat vij. úmagar, er hann fêdde með þesso.

But suppose that Gudmundr had become a bishop in normal times. If we assume that he would necessarily have treated the revenues of a bishopric exactly like the stipend of a single priest, we are setting up a naïve notion of our own and fathering it on Guðmundr. Besides, he did not become bishop in normal times. As bishop-elect his finances were taken out of his hands, to such an extent that he could not even have his nephews to live with him, far less bestow largesse on a wider group of deserving persons.[64] And once the situation in Hólar diocese deteriorated into virtual civil war, the exactions of Guðmundr and his followers upon the farmers were of the sort practised by generals and armies at all times, from necessity rather than choice.

I am not suggesting that Guðmundr was mean with money, nor that today he would win prizes in the Harvard Business School. But the evidence for his being always generous beyond the point of irresponsibility is weaker than has usually been assumed. One piece of evidence might be taken as an admission of his own incompetence. Did he not, as a new bishop, write to Páll of Skálaholt to say that

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63) BS, i. 431-2.

64) BS, i. 477.

a joint-administrator had been appointed to the see of Hólar, because[65]

'menn kvíddo feárforráðum mínum.'

But this letter is to be read in the context of his apparently genuine doubts about the wisdom of his becoming bishop. These were doubts not about money, but about his own spiritual worthiness, and even more about other people's political worthiness. The letter seems to present Páll with the opportunity to reply that Guðmundr should not be bishop. Had Páll been anxious to back his brother of Hólar, he could have replied that neither Guðmundr nor anyone else should be expected to act as bishop of Hólar under such intolerable and humiliating conditions. Páll did not send such a reply, but it may have been the one that Guðmundr hoped for, and required to strengthen his position.

Let us assume, in the absence of stronger evidence to the contrary, that Guðmundr was not egregiously incompetent and that Kolbeinn, a pious man after all, was not as greedy as some other goðar of the Sturlungaöld. Their quarrel, in that case, may have started from a perfectly legitimate difference of opinion on how to run a see. In Western Europe the proponents of respectable sound finance, the Kolbeinns as we might say, stood aghast at the Wall Street Crash of 1929. It required John Maynard Keynes to show them a possible way out of their difficulties: and the policies of that economist might remind us of the biblical injunction to 'cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days', a precept of which Guðmundr must have approved.

If I have adequately sketched my idea of Guðmundr's character, a blow-by-blow description of his episcopate will scarcely be required. The moment that he appeared at the hearing of the case against the priest Ásbjǫrn:[66]

> þá gekk Guðmundr prestr til dómsins með staf ok stolo, ok firebauð þeim at dǿma prestinn.

he was set on a course of action that embroiled him in trouble for the rest of his life. But we should assume neither that this was

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65) BS, i. 479.

66) BS, i. 489.

his fault, nor that he would have held back had he known all the consequences for himself of his action, nor that he would have been right to hold back.

Guðmundr's courage in thus facing the issue is, I submit, more to be praised than the tact which another man in his place might have shown in keeping quiet. Since the grjótflaugarsumar of 1163 there had been every indication that the Icelandic polity was in crisis. The power that went with the possession of a goðorð was was passing into fewer and fewer hands, feuds became consequently more serious, and the access that goðar had to the wealth of the church accentuated both this social imbalance and its political effects. Peter Foote and others have analysed this process,[67] which W.P. Ker once summarised as follows:[68]

> In the old days, when there was a much larger proportion of smaller gentry, a feud could get itself fought out and settled in a more or less decent manner. When the enemy had been killed, and an ordinary number of vengeances taken on the one side or the other, the thing might die away.
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> ... the peculiar exasperation of feuds in the thirteenth century did not come from the imprudent Churchmen: it came from the bloated wealth and pride of a few great men... whose large estates and close family connections led them into trouble in manifold ways, and made the range of operations larger, the fever of enmity more malignant.

I do not propose that the power-greedy goðar be regarded as the villains of the story, but rather that they be cast in the rôle that some scholars have assigned to Guðmundr - the rôle of victims of circumstances. Modern societies that have not yet discovered how the forces of production can be directed to the best interests of all, cannot afford to feel superior to the Icelanders of the Sturlungaöld who similarly failed to solve the problem of the over-concentration of wealth and power in too few hands.

But in this situation Guðmundr was no passive victim of circumstances. With a new Christian application of the old heroic virtues, he challenged Icelandic society to place itself in the hands of the church. If we suspect that his programme had no hope

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67) Peter G. Foote, op.cit., 207-37, and sources cited there.

68) W.P. Ker, op.cit., ii. 160.

of success, then we must accept that the old Icelandic Commonwealth was destined to fall. If his actions in some ways precipitated a new stage of the crisis, it was because the crisis could not be side-stepped, and required new methods for its solution.

There are two strong hints in the saga that Guðmundr appreciated just why, if he became bishop of Hólar, his tenure of that office would be climacteric. Firstly, when Kolbeinn, who intended that Guðmundr as bishop should be his protégé, apologised about a torn table-cloth, Guðmundr replied:[69)]

> 'ekke sakar um dúkinn, en þar eptir man fara biskupdómr minn, svá man hann slitinn vera sem dúkrinn'.

This is not an admission of his unfitness for office, an insight into his own lack of insight: rather it is a realisation that taking office would require him to try to solve a politically insoluble situation. If anyone feels that this episode is built round a topos rather than real life, the second hint, a little earlier in the story, may be more convincing. Guðmundr says to his cousin Ǫgmundr:[70)]

> 'mér sýnist vande fylgja mikill, at eiga við marga menn ok ólýðna ok öfundarfulla ok ríka, eða muntu nú verða oss hlýðinn, ef vér vǫndum um ráðit þitt?'

He receives the reply:

> 'þó at ek sé þér ólýðinn, þá mun ek þó öllum öðrum ólýðnare.'

Again, we need not take this at face value. The conversation may be a testimony to Guðmundr's exceptional qualities of moral leadership, and in that case we would discount it a little as being the words of a kinsman as recorded by a friendly chronicler. But the other level of meaning is that only ties of family and connection will carry weight in Icelandic politics now, and that these will not suffice to preserve peace. Whether or not the impersonal authority of the church can fill the void, the impersonal authority once held by the Alþing is no more.

Guðmundr's tragedy was that his first attempt to wield the church's authority led to the death of Kolbeinn Tumason in 1108. Once the buffer of an old-style goði who had some sense of responsibility to the church was removed, Guðmundr was face to face

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69) BS, i. 475.

70) BS, i. 473.

with the tough secularism of the new-style goðar. The battle where Kolbeinn died was the first example of Guðmundr's failure to control his own followers, but military leadership was the sort for which his training had least fitted him, and , besides, the goðar's control of their followers in the subsequent days was to be less than complete also. The responsibility for the battle in any case rests squarely with Kolbeinn, and the priest Brúsi with his obsolescent scale of values:[71)]

'þar ríðr biskup nú á brot með virþíng ykkra beggja.'

Guðmundr's subsequent career makes melancholy reading, but not in the sense that his own conduct diminished his moral stature in any way. Admirers of the classical sagas can find in him the tough-ness of the authentic hero. He curses his enemies in the vernacular 'svá at þeir skyldu allir skilja mega'.[72)] The mediaeval church may in general be open to criticism for its fondness for Latin for blessing and the vernacular for cursing: but the terrific verbal force of surviving examples of vernacular forms of excommunication[73)] shows that they were evolved by men who meant business: and the point that over-frequent repetition of them dulled their force for curser and cursed alike, a point made by historians in Iceland, Scotland and elsewhere, has only limited application to a basically devout and superstitious age. Once, when Guðmundr's men were in their enemies' hands, and had been threatened with death, the bishop was grudgingly induced by his men's entreaties to sing a miserere over his enemies:[74)]

ok segir þeim þó, at þeir vêre þá eige lausare en áðr.

This is courage, and not the hysterical courage of the would-be

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71) BS, i. 494.

72) BS, i.490, footnote.

73) For a blood-curdling example from Scotland, see eds., G. Donaldson and C. Macrae, St Andrews Formulare, 1514-1546 (Stair Society: Edinburgh, 1942-4), i. 268-71.

74) BS, i. 499.

martyr, but rather the 'cold, two o'clock in the morning courage' of the man who to the end is 'ólátr mjǫk' in a righteous cause.

But the admirer of hagiography can find ample proofs of Guðmundr's piety also, even in the worst moments of his later career. When he hears that his men have killed Tumi Sighvatsson, he assumes responsibility, under God, for their actions:[75)]

> kvað...þess vænta, at eptir guðs forsjá hefðe farit þeirra viðskipte.

Nor should we discount the saga's explanation of the subsequent journey to Grímsey:[76)]

> Hitt hélt ok annat til,,er biskup vilde þangat fara, at honum sýndist, sem var, skylda sín til vera, at kanna siðu manna, ok fegra, slíkt sem hann mêtte, um kristindóm, ok mest þurfte, ok biskupligu embêtte heyrðe til.

His own courage and piety were among the few allies that did not fail Guðmundr in the end. The archbishops of Nidaros must have known that it was Iceland and not Guðmundr that was beyond control, but only Guðmundr seemed to be theirs to command. In 1232 a new archbishop wrote removing Guðmundr from office.[77)] He was not so easily removed, and indeed his last years were a time of settlements of quarrels[78)] and of signs that a modus vivendi was evolving in the Hólar diocese. The description of the diocese when matters had been at their worst has been used by scholars to discredit Guðmundr:[79)]

> Aumlig ok hörmulig kristne var þar þá at seá: sumir prestar lögðo messo sönginn fire rêzlo sakir við höfðíngja, sumir af seálfs síns vilea; höfuðkirkjan, móðirin, sat í sorg ok í sút, ok sumar dêtr með henne, en sumar gleymðo yfir hennar harme, ok lifðe hverr sem lyste, en enge þorðe um at vanda, né satt at mêla, fire þeim Sigurðe ok Arnóre..

But the last phrase demonstrates clearly where the saga-writer put the blame - on the goðar - and, besides, a comparison of texts reinforces this point for us. The passage echoes more than one

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75) BS, i. 521.

76) BS, i. 521.

77) ed. Gudbrand Vigfusson, Sturlunga Saga (Oxford, 1878), i. 295.

78) BS, i. 551.

79) BS, i. 501.

passage in Thomas saga, such as:[80]

> enn helldr almenniligh modir sitr ok drypr med haurmung ok grati, fellir tær blodi blandat i ydru augliti, ogh er sua sett sem teinn i backa ok hofd at skotspęni, brixlud af sinum kunningium, er skaka sin hofud at henne ok segia, huar er nu gud þeira. Enn hun stynr mot hadi þeira ok drepr nidr hofdi kallandi til yduar.

Here it is Canterbury after the death of St Thomas which is described, and there is naturally no implication that Thomas is to blame. Equally, the biographer of Guðmundr has no thought of blaming him.

In 1237 the Pope in turn sought to depose Guðmundr from office but again without effect,[81] this time because a higher authority had intervened. Guðmundr's last moments were suitably heroic:[82]

> Hann sagði hvern mann eiga at andast í berri moldu...Þeir Helgi ok þorkell hófu hann af klæðum í andláti á fjöl ösku drefða, ok þar í höndum þeim skildist sálin við líkaminn, ok þar á fjölinni mintust þeir við hann...

Two aspects of Guðmundr's policies as bishop require a little more explanation - the social and the juridical. Guðmundr in the eyes of some scholars is the wandering bishop, with his train of vagabonds and cut-throats. There were such men among his followers, but no cause should be judged by its least worthy adherents. The moderate words of Einar Ól. Sveinsson deserve attention:[83]

> ...historical sources of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries indicate that at that time there were large numbers of such people [vagrants]. They are especially noticeable in the entourage of Bishop Guthmundr the Good, whose love for the poor was inexhaustible and to whom as a consequence they were naturally attracted. When temporal chiefs persecuted him, it is not unlikely that they earned for themselves the hostility of many of the poor.

This is one key to the situation. But men like Aron and Eyjólfr, with their relationship to the Seldælir family, were not mere vagrants, any more than they were mere cut-throats. Many of Guðmundr's adherents were not men of no social position, but men

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80) C.R.Unger, op. cit., 449.

81) Diplomatarium Islandicum (København, Reykjavík, 1857/76 -), i. No. 132, 11th May 1237.

82) BS, i. 585 (AM 657c, 4°).

83) Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 50.

of destroyed social position. Once they had been placed outside the law by the goðar, their only hope lay in faithful service to the bishop, their protector. A society divided by violence quickly and crudely selects its own new social categories: the lowly are by definition those on the losing side.

The saga protests with reason that[84] 'margir aðrir menn þeir er röskvir vóro' were among Guðmundr's supporters, and reminds us that the quarrel of Tumi Sighvatsson and other goðar with Guðmundr arose because[85]

> þeim þótte biskup ofstríðr, er þeir þóttust eige fram koma öllum ójafnaðe, þeim er þeir vildu, á vinum biskups, því at hann hélt þá drengiliga ok ríkuliga sína vine.

The great men latterly began to come to terms with Guðmundr, an indication that he sought to restore and not to overturn the social order. This may be the explanation for what Einar Ól. Sveinsson has shown us to be a puzzle, the lack of class hatred by the ordinary folk for the goðar:[86]

> [This hatred is not to be found] reflected anywhere in the secular literature of these times. (I do not, of course, include here what Sturlunga Saga and the Sagas of the Bishops have to say on this score.) Guthmundr lived partly in another world, and no independent system of ideas regarding society or the temporal life seems to have come into being among his followers.

By temperament Guðmundr was a populist in the sense of caring about the welfare of the poor: but perhaps neither by temperament nor by force of circumstances was he anything of a social revolutionary.

I have left to the last the most serious charge against Guðmundr: that, whatever the justice of the church's case and his, he prosecuted it in the wrong juridical ways, and opened the door that led to the 1260s. As Einar Ól. Sveinsson reminds us, Guðmundr:[87]

> ...as far as we can see...never tried to have the changes he

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84) BS, i. 493.

85) BS, i. 516.

86) Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 50.

87) Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 126.

desired made into law by the Althing.

Bishop Árni Þorláksson was to do this with some success amid the Norwegian-enforced calm of the last years of the thirteenth century. But Guðmundr may have concluded, rightly, that in his day his cause could be won, if at all, only by first attending to the concrete realities of power within his own diocese. That in his search for a settlement he later turned to his archbishop has brought down much odium on his head.[88] Bishop Jón Helgason wrote that:

> Var það í fyrsta skifti, sem Íslendingar skutu deilumálum sínum beint undir erkibiskup, og eitt hið mesta óheillaverk. Með þessu samþyktu Íslendingar sjálfir afskifti útlendra höfðingja af málum sínum, í stað þess að mótmæla þeim með öllu ok vernda með því rétt sinn.
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> Er þetta fyrsta utanstefningin, sem til Íslands kom frá Noregi. Máttu Íslendingar þar sjálfum sér um kenna og þá sérstaklega Guðmundi Arasyni, því að hann verður fyrstur til þess að skjóta málum sínum undir dóm erkibiskups.

Jón Jóhannesson especially emphasised that:[89]

> Var það fyrsta sinn sem Íslendingar skutu málum sínum undir erlendan dómstól, svo að vitað sé, síðan á landnámsöld.

We may never arrive at a balanced judgment on these matters, since good historians today, like all good men in every country, tend to be nationalists. Icelanders have always done well to be wary of their larger neighbours. But it must be emphasised, in the case of Guðmundr, that the first decision to refer disputes to Nidaros was an agreed one, when Guðmundr and Kolbeinn Tumason reached temporary harmony at an early stage of the struggle.[90] After Kolbeinn's death Guðmundr still wanted to call the archbishop in: the unwillingness of the goðar at this stage was the expression of their own point of view, not Iceland's. The goðar preferred the mediation of Bishop Páll of Skálaholt. Turville-Petre and Olszewska say that 'since Páll was not in the forefront of his supporters, Guðmundr regarded him as an enemy'.[91] Guðmundr had

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88) Bishop Jón Helgason, op. cit., 114, 117.

89) Jón Jóhannesson, op. cit., 240.

90) BS, i. 491.

91) G.Turville-Petre & E.Olszewska, op. cit., xvi.

some justification for thinking this, if indeed he did, because, as they themselves state, some of the goðar 'were Páll's dearest friends'. In preferring the mediation of the archbishop to that of Páll, Guðmundr was no less if no more nationalistic than his opponents.

To involve the archbishop of Nidaros was perhaps necessarily to involve the king of Norway, but this was hardly Guðmundr's fault. Snorri's Heimskringla is a massive tesimony to the Icelanders' awareness that kings of Norway since Haraldr enn hárfagri had been interested in their country. Icelanders, including Guðmundr's kinsmen, had seldom hesitated to play politics when in Norway, and Bishop Páll had been particularly careful to win the friendship of King Sverrir. It is tempting to cast mediaeval churchmen in an anti-national role, and sayings like the following come readily to hand:[92)]

> ... hitt er stórliga mjök harmanda, at þú trúir, at forn óvandi, sá sem á várum landskekli var upp tekinn um leikmanna forráð á kirkjum, megi eigi réttliga niðrbrjótst með þeim, sem allr heimrinn heldr, ok af páfanum eru allir skyldaðir til at halda...

But this of course is a speech by Bishop Árni in later and vastly changed conditions, and not a speech by Guðmundr Arason. In any case, it came as naturally as breathing to a mediaeval churchman to look for authority to Rome, and more directly and importantly to his metropolitan. This could have awkward political and practical consequences. In Scotland, a papal bull of c. 1192 secured the church from the over-bearing attentions of English archbishops, but as a province without a metropolitan, Scotland had thereafter to cope with the trouble and expense of taking all appeals from the Scottish bishops to Rome itself.

Among the hardships endured by small nations is the need to foster nationalism while keeping national historiography as objective as possible. I hope that this will be a more acceptable sentiment in the mouth of, say, a Scottish historian than it might be if expressed by historians of some other countries. From the 1530s till our own day, no Englishman has had to worry about the intervention of foreign courts of law in his country. This helps explain

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92) BS, i. 739. (Árna Biskups Saga)

how easy English historians have found it to place the career of Thomas Becket in perspective. We can see this in the case of J.A. Froude. Of this nineteenth-century English historian it has been said:[93)]

> Nationalism suffused the whole cast of his mind, it was part of the essence of his thinking, almost the fons et origo from which his interpretation of history, his religious adherence, his whole intellectual life took its rise.

Yet English nationalism has had so much of its own way in the modern world that it rarely requires to raise its voice. When Froude describes how Henry VIII passed an act forbidding appeals to Rome, he offers a few gentlemanly condolences to Catherine of Aragon, but proclaims in a marginal gloss 'as a national act, it was wholly excellent'.[94)] And yet, when Froude comes to the desecration of Thomas Becket's tomb, and denunciation of him as a traitor to the state for his role in the church international, he writes sympathetically of the sense of horror felt throughout Europe:[95)]

> The tomb of Becket was the property of Christendom rather than of England.

Modern Scotland is a less admirable place than modern Iceland simply because we have shown less national spirit. Yet even we have found the intervention of the House of Lords in Scots civil cases since 1707 to be more than a technical lawyers' grievance. That Icelanders within living memory had to submit to the indignity of their law cases being decided in København is, I think, a clue to the reason why some Icelanders have been a little too severe on Guðmundr Arason.

Bishop Guðmundr helped to polarise Icelandic society into spiritual and secular. But as long as goðar had had control of the church, there is more evidence that the church tended to be secularised than that society as a whole tended to be spiritualised.

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93) T.P. Peardon, The Transition in English Historical Writing, 1760-1830 (New York, 1933), 162.

94) J.A. Froude, The History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Death of Elizabeth (London 1856-70), i. 413.

95) Ibid., iii. 300-302.

Guðmundr did what he thought right, in challenging Icelandic society to examine its conscience, in bearing witness to his times (perhaps in a more positive sense than Régis Boyer would allow). The Icelandic church retained its national character, in part at least, through the darkest days: and in the nineteenth century its priests played their part in heralding a new dawn. Guðmundr Arason, a Christian combining the new piety with the heroism of his ancestors, began in the fourteenth century to be recognised as having been a pillar of the Icelandic church. In 1314 or 1315 'Audun byskup let taka vpp bein Gudmundar byskups'.[96)]

This was a good time for small nations and humble men and women. In 1302, at Courtrai south-west of Ghent, the feudal might of France went down before the pikes of the Flemish weavers and peasants. In 1314, at Bannockburn in central Scotland, a national cause long sustained by the people, while their leaders vacillated, attained at last a signal military triumph. And at Hólar in the north of Iceland, Guðmundr the Good began officially to receive the veneration he had long been accorded by the Icelandic people.

In conclusion, I should like to thank my colleague Margaret Orme for her help in preparing this paper. I should add that, for two good reasons, I offer my conclusions in a humble spirit. First, I have written about the history of Iceland without a first-hand knowledge of that country. Second, I have disagreed a little, and on a relatively minor matter - the career of one man - with the views of some scholars. Had they not painted the picture of the Sturlungaöld for us, I should not have been capable of suggesting slightly different shading.

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96) ed. Gustav Storm, Islandske Annaler indtil 1578 (Christiania, 1888), 393 gives 1314 as the date: 151, 204, 265, 344 give 1315.