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JESSE L. BYOCK

Cultural Continuity, the Church, and the Concept of Independent Ages in Medieval Iceland

The idea that Iceland's history is a series of independent ages separated from one another by periods of abrupt change has been long established and currently has wide acceptance. It was most strongly advocated by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Sigurður Nordal from the 1930s through the 1950s. Although different schools of saga interpretation disagree profoundly with various aspects of the bookprose theory of literary saga origin, Nordal's and Sveinsson's bookprose view on the existence of independent ages has become virtually canonical among modern students of the sagas. There have been few objections to the bookprose presumption that the thirteenth century, the period in which the sagas were written, was essentially a new age in Iceland's history. It is time to question the concept of independent ages, and in this essay I propose to do so.

One assertion that is central to the concept is that there is a distinct difference between life in the earlier saga age (*söguöld*, ca. 930-1030) and the descriptions in the sagas about the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the long *Sturlunga* compilation. In the view of the bookproseists, the situations narrated in the *Sturlunga saga* are different from the type of events that transpired in the saga age. Keeping with this view, *Sturlunga saga* is understood to be a reasonably accurate description of the unique, later age in Iceland's medieval history. This period, called *ófriðartími* (the time of troubles), is believed to have developed from new or radically altered conditions which appeared only in the first half of the twelfth century and lasted until the end of the old Icelandic Free State in 1262-1264. The bookproseists regarded the *ófriðartími* as the key underpinning to the composition of the literary sagas; it alone provided the special artistic stimulation necessary, but previously lacking, for the creation of a literature as great as the family sagas.¹

Contrary to the accepted bookproseists position is the proposition that the backdrop to the cultural and literary events that took place in the latter part of the Icelandic Free State was continuity rather than change. Change, of course, cannot be dismissed, but in Icelandic history, even when it originated in foreign stimuli, change was subordinate to the stronger influence of cultural continuity. Where change is evident, it contributed to evolution rather than to abrupt transformations. To suggest that an array of independent ages formed the background to the literary achievements of thirteenth-century Iceland belittles their value and disproportionately magnifies one facet of the continuum. The result is that the picture of Iceland's early development is seriously distorted.

The bookprosisists find continuity in the developments of Icelandic culture into the thirteenth century mainly in the abstract area of morality. In particular they stress the retention of traditional Norse ethics and values among the laity Einar Ólafur Sveinsson pursues this line of thought in *Sturlungaöld*². (1940; translated as *The Age of the Sturlungs*, 1953), as well as in many of his other writings. For Sveinsson, the vitality and the artistry of the sagas are, to a large extent, an outgrowth of tensions and turmoil created by religious currents in the *ófriðartími*. Particularly important was the disruptive clash between foreign ethical values advocated by the church and the older Icelandic standards of conduct adhered to, at least in part, by the more conservative laymen.³ With good reason Sveinsson also sees the contrast of old and new political roles as a source of anxiety among the free farmers. Great fiction requires stimulus and purpose; according to the bookprose theory, the medieval authors found their motivation in the awareness that theirs was an age of transition and that they were witnesses to the passing of an older order.⁴ An eloquent stylist, Sveinsson writes of the thirteenth century:

And in this changeable atmosphere grow the masterpieces of the age, the Sagas of Icelanders. They have their root in the virtues that were fighting for their existence, and are thus, as great literature so often is, a negation of the principal elements in the life and manners of their age. They represent men's attempts at creating out of shrill discords of reality some degree of harmony in the world of art without abnegating reality itself.⁵

If the emotional and intellectual aspects of a new literature were present in the thirteenth century, so too was a newly developed literary form. For the bookprosisists, the family sagas resulted from a complex blending of disparate elements. The cultural and intellectual prerequisites required for the amalgamation of continental written forms and thought with their indigenous Icelandic, oral counterparts demanded a period of acculturation and adjustment. Essential to the bookprose theory is the view that the sagas are not reworked oral history but are a new, creative, literary art form whose origin is found in the development of stylistic skills in the twelfth century.

It was Sigurður Nordal who, building on the work of Björn M. Ólsen, developed the bookprose point of view into a coherent theory of literary origin. Nordal began to formulate the theory in 1920 in his book on Snorri Sturluson⁶ and in the 1930s elaborated on it in his lengthy introductions to *Egils saga* and *Borgfirðinga sögur* in the *Íslenzk fornrit* series.⁷ The theory finally reached its mature form in Nordal's essay, "Sagalitteraturen" in *Nordisk Kultur* (1953).⁸ Theodore Andersson, in *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* (1964), reviews the history of the controversy between the bookprosisists and the freeprosisists. After tracing the origins of the bookprosisists' position and its fundamental doctrines, he summarizes Nordal's theory of saga literature:

The basic assumption is that the saga is governed by the recognized rules of literary history and can be understood in the context of a literary development from 1100 to 1400. The movement began in the historical works of Sæmundr and Ari in the south of

Iceland. The subjects of these works were history, genealogy, and chronology; the spirit was learned and the method critical. Somewhat later a counter-trend appeared in the literary center of the north. The monastery at Þingeyrar opened its doors to hagiographic and legendary tendencies, which compromised the critical spirit of the southern school. At the same time concessions were made to a taste for 'light reading' by the inclusions of fuller details and anecdotal matter (*Sverris saga*). The two poles of literary activity — the learned and the entertaining (*visindi og list*) - found a synthesis in the works of Snorri Sturluson in the west of Iceland. To the period of synthesis belong the family sagas with their combination of fact (real or supposed) and fiction, their genealogical and historical apparatus within a popular framework. Toward the end of the thirteenth century the synthesis began to break down and split into purely fictional sagas on the hand and unadorned annals on the other. Thus there is a kind of rough symmetry between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries flanking a period of combination and concentration, the period of the classical saga.⁹

In order to strengthen their contention that these historically oriented ancestral tales originated primarily in a late literary synthesis, the bookprosisists put forward a complex argument aimed at proving that the thirteenth-century authors did not need a direct link with the past in order to write their sagas. Not surprisingly, given so resolute a literary interpretation, the capacities and the intent of the saga authors have received considerable attention from the bookprosisists. In their publications, particularly in the standard *fornrit* editions of the sagas, a special section of the introduction is often devoted to the anonymous saga author. In such studies he is presented as a person who, in most instances, was intellectually prepared to employ new literary skills to create his own tale about the past rather than simply to rework older oral or written stories. This explanation of authorial motivation, coupled as it is with the view that the saga authors were intentionally pursuing literary goals, is strongly argued by Nordal for *Hrafnkels saga*: "Thus it seems quite natural to believe, almost without any demonstration, that *Hrafnkatla* was the work of a single author whose purpose was not to narrate a true story but to compose a work of fiction; a man who, endowed with a powerful imagination, literary virtuosity, and a knowledge of men, was sustained by one of the most powerful literary movements in recorded history."¹⁰ When analyzing Nordal's and the bookprose position we must not forget that the above statement was made in the first half of the twentieth century, a time of robust nationalism among the Icelanders. The country was emerging from centuries of poverty and isolation. Most Icelanders wanted independence from Denmark, whose government countered with the argument that the island society was not sufficiently developed to stand on its own. In such an atmosphere Iceland's need to trace the literary creativity of its sagas to more than a rude tradition of unlettered storytelling may have strongly influenced the thinking of participants in the bookprose/freeprose debate.

According to the bookprosisists, the artistry of the medieval author was not free from strictures; it was tempered by the popular demand for a realistic fiction whose hallmark was the appearance of truth. As Nordal points out, for the medieval Icelandic taste "to stamp a Saga as a 'lying story' was the same

as to denounce it as a bad Saga, poor literature."¹¹ Instead of building on this realization and opening the fascinating issue of medieval intent to scholarly investigation, the bookprosists tried to explain it away. Again Nordal's view exemplifies the bookprosists' exclusive attachment to the solutions offered by literary criticism: "Would it not be a very poor exchange to possess 'A true Account of the late Grettir Ásmundarson' in place of *Gretis saga*? Truth exists in many forms, and truth about the meaning of life itself is often more clearly displayed in fiction than in traditions or even in historical studies."¹²

It is not difficult to understand why a lack of continuity between the saga age and descriptions in the family sagas is a major premise of the bookprose theory. The logical implications of the theory of literary saga origin demand that kind of formulation. Icelanders did not learn to write until about 1100, almost a hundred years after the period in which most of the events narrated in the family sagas took place. According to the bookprosists, the Icelanders did not learn to write sufficiently well to compose sagas until about 1200. Therefore these complex medieval narratives either are the fictional output of thirteenth-century authors who created them out of short, sketchy traditions, whether oral or written, or they find their source in a developed oral prehistory. The bookprosists have little doubt on this point. Excepting some of the less skillfully composed works, such as *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Reykdalea saga*, they view the majority of the narratives as the products of thirteenth-century creativity.¹³ Older written historical sources, such as *Landnámabók* and genealogical lists, are assumed to have been readily available to the thirteenth-century authors and to have supplied simple facts and basic outlines about the events that took place earlier.

The bookprose theory holds that the genius of the sagas lies in the ability of their authors to build a factually false, though realistic-sounding, past out of thirteenth-century conditions. Thus in one specific aspect of their theory the bookprosists rely, quite reasonably, on the continuity of cultural norms. As Nordal writes, "The astounding achievement of the writers of the Family Sagas was the elevation of the first century of the Icelandic Commonwealth to an Heroic Age — that they were able to give such lustre to an age so near in time, to people in homely surroundings, to small dealings between ordinary farmers, without any titles or paraphernalia of nobility — to make the events and the characters at the same time so grand and so real."¹⁴

The rationale for the bookprose position that the *ritöld*, the thirteenth-century "age of writing", was fundamentally different from the saga age rests on a traditionally unquestioned view. This view holds that the later *ófríðartími* (the period within which the *ritöld* is placed) was preceded by and cut off from the saga age by an "age of peace" (*fríðaröld*). The *fríðaröld* spanned the period from the end of the saga age (ca. 1030) to the death of Iceland's second bishop, Gizurr Ísleifsson, in 1118.¹⁵

The concept of a *fríðaröld*, like that of an *ófríðartími*, was by no means an invention of bookprosists. In fact, the argument that Icelandic history can be neatly compartmentalized into *landnámsöld* (the age of settlements), *söguöld*, *fríðaröld*, *ófríðartími*, *Sturlungaöld*, and *ritöld* has been a mainstay of both lite-

rary and historical interpretations since the nineteenth century. In 1874 Konrad Maurer referred to the *friðaröld* as "nicht zwar die glänzendste, wohl aber die glücklichste Periode des isländischen Freistaates."¹⁶ Implicit in his statement are two assumptions. The first is that the period saw radical change in societal and governmental forms. To support this position, Maurer placed emphasis on the effect of Christian teachings — especially under the leadership of Bishop Gizurr — which took firm hold of the chieftains. The second assumption is that these radical changes during the *friðaröld* caused a distinct break in medieval Icelandic history and cut the later centuries off from the earlier saga age. The result, it has been assumed, was something new: stability and peace. The assumption of far-reaching change rests primarily on a statement from *Kristni saga*, a church history describing the introduction and early growth of Christianity.¹⁷ *Kristni saga* reports that Bishop Gizurr, as the promulgator of Christian teachings, pacified the land so successfully that there were no major disputes among men of power: "Gizurr byskup friðaði svá vel landit, at þá urðu engar stórdeilur með höfðingjum, en vápnaburðr lagðist mjök niðr. Þá váru flestir virðingamenn lærðir og vígðir til presta, þo að höfðingjar væri."¹⁸

In recent years historians have questioned the existence of a clearly delineated *friðaröld*. In a thought-provoking article entitled "Goðar og bændur,"¹⁹ Gunnar Karlsson argues that the sharp break in continuity ascribed to the *friðaröld* is more fancy than fact. If the bookprosisists had self-serving reasons for maintaining their belief in an age of peace, the motivation of earlier scholars must also be questioned. Stemming from a time when scholars were unabashedly searching for an older and purer Germanic past, the concept of a *friðaröld* made it possible to separate the preconversion heroics of the family sagas from the cruelty and the moral and political turmoil of the later *Sturlunga* sagas. In an important article, "Full goðorð og forn og heimildir frá 12. öld,"²⁰ Björn Sigfússon has led the way in showing that the concentration of power in the hands of fewer *goðar* families in the thirteenth century was a continuing process that began much earlier than has generally been assumed. Sigfússon shows that this development was not simply the result of the troubles that flared in the beginning of the twelfth century but that it spanned the eleventh century and originated as far back as the saga age. The potential for imbalance was inherent in the system of government, perhaps from the start. Exactly when the accumulation of power became a significant process is difficult to pinpoint. Around the year 1000, however, Guðmundr ríki from Möðruvellir exercised remarkable clout stemming from his control over an inherited family *goðorð* in Eyjafjörðr. Moreover, he had so many followers in Þingeyjarþing to the north that he may also have had a *goðorð* there.²¹

The work of Helgi Þorláksson is also of central importance in a reconsideration of continuity. In a thorough analysis of urbanization in medieval Iceland,²² he points out the lack of a movement toward towns and settled trading centers. His data emphasize the continuity of Iceland's pattern of rural settlement from the ninth through the thirteenth century. Further,

Þorláksson stresses the role of the *stórbændr*, wealthy farmers who at times in the thirteenth century openly challenged the chieftains.²³ In his well-documented articles Þorláksson discusses these farmers' rights, which he, like many earlier scholars, traces back to the first centuries of the Free State.

The few sources on which the distinctness of the *fríðaröld* is based cannot survive close scrutiny. The famous quotation from *Kristni saga* (noted above) most likely reflects the bias of the clergy. The praise lavished on a prominent bishop in a church history is hardly a reliable source for assessing the development of a nation in a period of almost a hundred years. Indeed, another church source, *Hungrvaka*, offers a conflicting view on at least the first part of the *fríðaröld*, noting the problems faced by Iceland's first bishop, Gizurr's father, Ísleifr Gizurarson (1056-1080): "Hann hafði nauð mikla á marga vegu í sínum byskupsdómi fyrir sakir óhlyðni manna. Má þat afþví merkja nökkut, í hverjum nauðum hann hefir verit fyrir sakir ótrú ok óhlyðni ok ósiða sinna undirmanna, at lög [sögu] maðrinn átti mæðgur tvær ok þá lögðust sumir menn út í viking ok þá herskap, ok mörg endemi tóku menn þau til önnur, þau er nú mundi ódæmi þykkja, of menn hendi slíkt."²⁴ Unfortunately, no other sources for these troubles have survived.

To go to the opposite extreme, to deny that the late eleventh century was a relatively stable and prosperous period, would be an equally untenable position. This period coincides with the end of the viking disturbances in Scandinavia and on the continent, and it is likely that the roots of Iceland's prosperity lay beyond the borders of the island. As Jón Jóhannesson notes, "profitable trading and other conditions favourable to economic growth were the main reasons for this era of peace and prosperity in all the Scandinavian countries."²⁵

Gunnar Karlsson suggests that the words of *Kristni saga* contain a good deal of truth and are not simply an encomium for Bishop Gizurr.²⁶ If he is correct, as seems likely, then the mistake of scholars has been to read too much into the passage. In fact, the statement says little more than this: during the term of Gizurr's episcopate (1082-1118) there were no disturbances among the chieftains as serious as the major dispute that broke out between the two powerful chieftains Þorgils Oddason and Haflíði Másson shortly after Gizurr's death. The words of *Kristni saga* in no way rule out the petty quarrels that one would expect to have continued from the saga age. Descriptions of such feuds fill the pages of both the family sagas and the oldest of the *Sturlunga* sagas.

Examination of these feuds, and of the central role of feud in the society,²⁷ reveals a picture of cultural continuity, a picture which ill accords with the dictates of bookprolist literary presumptions. The petty nature of the quarrels that make up the feuds was precisely the element that deceived the bookprolists. They did recognize elements of continuity but, because they were looking for indications of a great written literature, they hurriedly passed over the mundane descriptions of feud. Instead they concentrated on heroic or tragic acts worthy of literary analysis, thereby largely ignoring much of the substance of the sagas. This substance arose from the social function of the

tales; the family and Sturlunga sagas enabled an insular medieval people to explore the ways in which violence was controlled, individuals were protected, and decisions were reached.²⁸

By turning away from artificial divisions, we move toward a long overdue reappraisal of medieval Icelandic history. The way is opened to an exploration of the complex flow of a society growing and altering with time. That there was a radical break in continuity between the earlier and later periods of Iceland's history is an erroneous assumption based on insufficient data. Furthermore, it violates the logic of social development. When dealing with a settled rural society one assumes continuity, not fundamental change, in the absence of information to the contrary. Change must be proved, and it is a curious and illogical development that in Icelandic studies the opposite view has prevailed.

If the thread of historical development is traced, then the old Icelandic Commonwealth — escaping as it did foreign invasion, religious wars, and rapid social or economic upheaval — was at any point in its history part of a cultural continuum. It is only natural that occasional periods of political disequilibrium would have occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As Iceland entered into marginal membership in the distant and richer European medieval culture, it lost its self-confident and secure position in the more parochial Norse world. For all the talk of turmoil, Iceland retained its traditional law, culture, and social structure relatively intact throughout the transition.

Those who emphasize change rather than continuity maintain that the growth of the church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries radically disrupted Iceland's traditional social framework.²⁹ A fresh look, however, suggests that the evidence is less than convincing. This is not to say that the church was unimportant, I believe, rather, that its disruptive influence has been taken for granted instead of being systematically proven. There is strong evidence that the church, far from being a powerful force for change, early adapted itself to the decentralized nature of the traditional Icelandic governmental system. It existed as a politically weak, though morally prestigious, institution throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Again, the work of Björn Sigfússon offers a significant reevaluation of an important aspect of Iceland's early history. In an insightful argument, Sigfússon questions the now standard view that amalgamation of power into fewer hands and the political disruptions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were largely a response to the growing wealth and power of the church.³⁰ In stating his premise — that church influence, whether direct or indirect, has been considerably exaggerated by modern scholarship — Sigfússon observes that neither the power of Guðmundr ríki (around the year 1000), nor that of the later chieftain Hafliði Masson in 1120, derived from any connection with the church. He points out that church power did not initiate a pattern of political evolution, which was already in evidence in the pre-Christian tenth century. In presenting his argument Sigfússon specifically takes issue with scholars such as Árni Pálsson and Jón Jóhannesson, who had placed undue

emphasis on the church's influence in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland.³¹

But many issues remain to be addressed. It is noteworthy that, in the otherwise well-chronicled intrigues of the *stórhöfðingjar*, the powerful chieftains of the later period, it is never reported that they battled over the appointment of an Icelandic bishop.³² The consistent absence of violence in the filling of high Icelandic church positions is all the more remarkable because, until 1237, the country's bishops were elected by the chieftains at the Althing. When one bishop died, the normal procedure was for the surviving bishop to suggest a politically acceptable candidate to the chieftains.

Clearly the office of bishop was prestigious, and the episcopal seats at Hólar in the north and Skálholt in the south were usually filled by members of the most powerful families, especially the Haukdælir and the Oddaverjar.³³ That the elections engendered so little conflict is, however, difficult to ignore.³⁴ Not only does the ease with which these offices were filled stand in strong contrast to the fierce struggles for power among chieftains, but it is also at variance with the situation on the continent. There the elaborate political machinations that often accompanied the selection of high churchmen underscored the political, economic, and governmental importance of the church in Europe. Had the office been one of significant power in Iceland, the choice of a new bishop would have been of vital concern and would undoubtedly have led to fierce contention among leading families, ever on the lookout for more authority.

There are other reasons for doubting the scope of church strength and influence. Beyond governing the internal life of the church, the Icelandic bishops had relatively little authority. In clear defiance of the policies of the Roman church (especially in the wake of the Gregorian reforms), Icelandic secular leaders not only controlled selection of the bishops but, throughout the Free State period, regulated almost all points of contention between the church and lay society. Virtually nowhere in medieval Europe, especially in the thirteenth century, did laymen exercise as much control over the church as they did in Iceland. This situation was formalized in the period 1122-1133 when the laws governing the relations between church and temporal society were written down. These laws, contained in a section of *Grágás* known as *Kristinna laga þátr*, (often called *Kristinn rétr forni*), remained in force in Skálholt until 1275 and in Hólar until 1354.

Even when laws from the Christian law section of *Grágás* were broken, the bishop had no right of prosecution, for judicial matters stemming from breaches of Christian laws were handled by secular courts.³⁵ Presumably a bishop exercised judicial power only when a priest was disobedient to his superior. At times the church's inability to execute one of its judgments made it advisable to turn the matter over to the secular courts. So matters remained until at least the end of the Free State (1262-1264), though in 1253 a curious event occurred. In that year, according to the New Christian Law Code (*kristinn rétr nýi*), instituted by the Skálholt bishop, Árni Þorláksson (1269-1298), the Althing drafted a resolution declaring that church law should take

precedence over the law of the land when they were in conflict.³⁶ Scholarly views on this statement have varied from complete acceptance to total disbelief, but Jón Jóhannesson, a historian who often stresses the importance of the church, has provided the most logical explanation. He points out that in 1253, a time of serious feuding among *stórhöfðingjar*, many chieftains stayed away from the Althing. We know from other sources that Gizurr Þorvaldsson, strongest of the leaders who did attend the Al thing, was at the time particularly interested in ingratiating himself with the bishops. It is possible, therefore, that Gizurr managed to have the resolution passed by the *lögrétta*. In Jón Jóhannesson's opinion, "The resolution of the Court of Legislature in 1253 was never anything but a dead letter, although later Bishop Árni Þorláksson tried to resuscitate it. The chieftains who were absent from the Althing in 1253 were no doubt unwilling to agree to its adoption, and it may in fact never have been formally passed as law, and probably never went beyond the stage of a proposed amendment [*nýmæli*] ."³⁷

Although structure, terminology, and general organization of the medieval Icelandic church resembled continental models, the church in Iceland functioned quite differently from the church in Norway or for that matter in the rest of Europe. As on the continent, the church in Iceland claimed ownership of a great deal of land. The difference was that the church in Norway or in most other places in Europe actually controlled the land, benefiting from all the social and political ramifications of landownership, whereas in Iceland the claim was hollow. There most of the church's land was only nominally administered by churchmen. Soon after Iceland's conversion (ca. 999-1000), farmers and chieftains began to build churches, and except for the church at Þingvöllr such undertakings were private enterprises. In contrast, in Norway, after its conversion in the same period, most of the churches were built either by royal order or by local communities. Ownership and maintenance of Norwegian churches were public responsibilities.

In Iceland the *goðar* and other landowners who originally constructed the church buildings normally ceded the farmsteads on which the buildings stood to the church, though they retained a right of control for themselves and their heirs. Owing to this custom, the secular "owner" of such a farmstead (the most important ones were called *staðir*) enjoyed most of its benefits; the episcopal administration received a relatively minor share of the wealth and the power accruing from possession of such property. A *staðr* owner appointed the priest (usually a relative, a bondsman, or a poorly paid freeman if the owner himself was not ordained). By the letter of the law the land was church property; therefore the layman (*goði* or not) who controlled the land not only was exempt from tithing on the property but also benefited from tithes paid by his neighbors. This situation was consistent with the practice of pre-Christian times, when the *goðar* were both secular and spiritual leaders.³⁸

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

Icelandic monasteries were a peculiarly indigenous form of religious house; their members conducted their lives by rules based on foreign models but functioned largely in accordance with native cultural traditions. The gap between Icelandic and continental houses was further widened by the fact that (as far as can be determined) not one of the Icelandic institutions was founded as a branch of a foreign monastery, as were the Cistercian houses in Norway. The first successful Icelandic monastery, at Þingeyrar, was not begun until 1112 and not formally established until 1133;³⁹ the second one was started at Munkaþverá in 1155. Like the first two, the few houses founded later were small in size. Together only about ten monasteries and one nunnery were established before the end of the Free State, and few of them could be considered rich. With only a handful of members in each, these tiny communities faced grave difficulties; some failed early, leaving almost no trace. The monastic system, with its late start, its poverty, and its struggles to survive, was hardly a solid foundation for magnifying the church's power and influence into a major force.

Until 1267 at least, neither Hólar nor Skálholt could boast a cathedral chapter of canons (the *kórsbræðr*, choir-brethren, of Norwegian cathedrals).⁴⁰ Thus during the Free State the Icelandic episcopal centers operated differently from their European counterparts. Probably there were no chapters because the bishops lacked the economic means to support them. Although one of the Mar bishops, Guðmundr Arason (1203-1237), did attempt to gather about him more than the normal small following, those he attracted were mostly indigents or unattached armed men. Such a group bore little resemblance to the clerical entourage of a cathedral town on the continent. His limited resources made the bishop dependent upon nearby farmers who, especially during Guðmundr's stormy episcopate, repeatedly dispersed the bishop's following.

The Icelandic church's lack of power is further attested by the failure of the two diocesan seats, Skálholt and Hólar, to achieve importance as administrative and trade centers. Both were far from the main roads and difficult to reach from the sea and so they remained during the life of the Free State. Helgi Þorláksson, who has carefully assessed the value of landholdings in the early period, concludes that even at the end of the Free State the two episcopal seats were scarcely more wealthy than the most prosperous secular-controlled *staðir* such as Grenjaðarstaðir, Oddi, and Reykholt.⁴¹

Only when Norwegian royal government was introduced after the demise of the Free State did the Icelandic church succeed in freeing most of its property from secular authority. Even then, change came slowly, taking many decades. For example, an issue as central as the control of *staðir* (*staðamál*) was not settled until 1297 and then only by compromise. The position of the church was significantly strengthened when the royal government instituted new provisions under which the Icelandic bishops relinquished their seats in the *lögrétta*. With this done bishops could direct their full attention to controlling church farms and other property. In this undertaking, which pitted churchmen against wealthy farmers, the clerics were supported

by the archbishop in Norway and even, at times, by the king. Although secular leaders still contested church demands, the power of the Skálholt bishop was notably strengthened in 1275, the year in which Bishop Árni's New Christian Law Code was adopted by the Althing for the southern diocese. With legal guidelines decidedly advantageous to the church, both the power and the wealth of the see began to rise dramatically; between 1289 and 1520 real property owned by Skálholt increased sixfold.⁴²

The weakness of the church during the Free State is particularly striking in view of the fact that it was the only institution in a highly decentralized society that was based on a centralized foreign model. The failure of Iceland's two reform bishops, Saint Þorlákr Þórhallsson and Guðmundr Arason, to bring about significant change in the status of the church, especially in view of perennial divisions among the chieftains, emphasizes the church's deficiencies. Nevertheless, clerical influence is given undue weight in the large number of extant church writings, whose authors, often apologists for the church, were intent upon recording the accomplishments of its leaders and saintly men. When appraising the role of the church and its power relative to other social forces in Iceland, it is well to remember that at the beginning of the twelfth century, when the Icelandic church was moving toward a higher degree of institutionalization and assuming a legally defined position, the patterns of secular decision making in Iceland had been in place since the early tenth century.

The bookprosisist view of independent ages is a concept that cannot withstand scrutiny. In the study of the old Icelandic Free State and its culture, the terms *söguöld*, *fríðaröld*, *áfriðarlími*, *Sturlungaöld*, and *ritöld* should never have been taken as more than chronological signposts. As such they are useful terms, but reliance on them as signifying distinct historical eras has come to imply a separateness that did not exist. Such an interpretation obscures the continuing development that bound together the earlier and later stages of the same medieval society.

FOOTNOTES

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1. This position is most strongly argued by Einar Ól Sveinsson in his famous book *Sturlungaöld. Drög um íslenska menningu á þrettánda öld* (Reykjavík: 1940), translated by Jóhann S. Hannesson as *The Age of the Sturlungs* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1953).
 2. Ibid.
 3. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, "The Icelandic family Sagas and the Period in which their Authors Lived," *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 12 (1937-38): 81, "The contrast between the layman and the cleric may be seen in the homiletic, undisguised partiality of the Biskupasaga and in the purely secular objectivity of the Family Saga."
 4. Sigurður Nordal, *The Historical Element in the Icelandic Family Sagas*, W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture 15 (Glasgow: Jackson, Son, and Company, 1957), "Above all, they [the saga authors] knew that they were themselves living in an age of transition in religion, morals, and politics. They had the old and the new outlook on life, so to speak, coexistent in themselves and they tried, on the whole with fair success, to sift out the old ideals for their heroes" (p. 29).
 5. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Sturlungs*, p. 75.
 6. Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson* (Reykjavík: Þ. B. Þorláksson, 1920). One of the quirks of bookprose is that members of the Icelandic school go to great lengths to deny that bookprose is a theory. See for example Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1958), p. 7.
 7. Sigurður Nordal, Introduction to *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Íslensk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933); idem, Introduction to *Borgfirðinga sögur*, Íslensk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938).
 8. Sigurður Nordal, "Sagalitteraturen," in *Litteraturhistorie*, ed. idem, Nordisk Kultur VIII: B (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1953), pp. 180-273.
 9. Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 76.
 10. Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða: A Study*, trans. R. George Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), p. 57.
 11. Sigurður Nordal, *Historical Element*, p. 26.
 12. Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða*, p. 64.
 13. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Introduction to *Eyrbyggja saga*, in Íslensk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), p. xxiii.
 14. Sigurður Nordal, *Historical Element*, p. 33.
 15. Sigurður Nordal, *Íslensk menning* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1942), vol. 1, pp. 289-290.
 16. Konrad von Maurer, *Island: von seiner ersten Entdeckung bis zum Untergange des Freistaats* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1874), p. 98.

17. *Kristni saga*, in *Íslendinga sögur*, vol. 1, Landssaga og Landnám, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1953), p. 277. The statement from *Kristni saga* (below) is supported by several similar though clearly more subjective pronouncements, such as the following two quotations from *Hungrvaka*, in *Byskupa sögur*, vol. 1, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1953): "Ok svá vildi hverr maðr sitja ok standa sem hann bauð, ungr ok gamall, sæll ok fátækr, konur ok karlar, ok var rétt at segja, at hann var bæði konungr ok byskup yfir landinu, meðan hann lifði" (ch. 4, p. 10); "Svá hugðist at inum vitrustum mönnum, at svá þótti drúpa Ísland eftir fráfall Gizurar byskups, sem Rómaborgarríki eftir fall Gregorii páfa" (ch. 5, p. 14). Modern scholars have likewise not put much credence in a statement by the North German church historian Adam of Bremen that the Icelanders revered their bishop Ísleifr Gizurarson (1056-1080) as if he were their king and obeyed him in everything. Jón Jóhannesson refers to Adam's pronouncement as "an obvious overstatement (*ofmælt*)." Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga Saga*, trans. Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974), p. 146.

18. "Gizurr was so successful in bringing about peace in his land that during his term of office no major disputes arose among men of power, and the practice of bearing arms was to a large degree abandoned. Then most men of rank were educated and took holy orders, even those who had previously assumed temporal authority" (trans. Haraldur Bessason in Jón Jóhannesson, *History*, p. 148).

19. Gunnar Karlsson, "Goðar og bændur," *Saga* 10 (1972): 34.

20. Björn Sigfússon, "Full goðorð og forn og heimildir frá 12. öld," *Saga* 3 (1960): 53-65.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

22. Helgi Þorláksson, "Urbaniseringstendenser på Island i middelalderen," *Urbaniseringsprosessen i Norden: Det XVII, nordiske historikermote, Trondheim 1977*, vol. 1, *Middelaldersteder*, ed. Grethe Authén Blom (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977). See also áorláksson's "Miðstöðvar stærstu byggða: "Um forstig þéttbýlismyndunar við Hvítá á hámiðöldum með samanburði við Eyrar, Gásar og erlendar hliðstæður," *Saga* 17 (1979): 125-164.

23. *Idem*, "Stórbændur gegn goðum: Hugleiðingar um goðavald, konungsvald og sjálfræðishug bænda um miðbik 13. alder," in *Söguslóðir: afmælisrit helgað Ólafi Hanssuni sjötugum 18. september 1979*, ed. B. Jónsson, E. Laxness, and H. Þorleifsson (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1979), pp. 227-250; "Stéttir, auður og völd á 12. og 13. öld," *Saga* 20 (1982): 63-113. See Gunnar Karlsson's response to the above article, "Um valdarkerfi 13. aldar og aðferðir sagnfræðinga," *Saga* 21 (1983): 270-275.

24. *Hungrvaka*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, ch. 2, p. 4: "As people showed him disobedience Bishop Ísleifr was faced with many and serious difficulties during his episcopal reign. It may be stated as an example of the distress which his subordinates caused him with their infidelity, immoral conduct and disobedience, that even the lawspeaker married twice, one of his wives being the daughter of the other. There were other men at this time who were known to indulge in viking raids and warfare. Further, many abominable acts were committed in this period that in our time (in the time of the chronicler) would be considered major outrages" (trans. Haraldur Bessason in Jóhannesson, *History*, p. 146.)

25. Jón Jóhannesson, *History*, p. 148.

26. Gunnar Karlsson, "Goðar, p. 35.

27. Andreas Heusler, *Das Strafrecht der Isländersagas* (Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot, 1911) and *Zum isländischen Fehdewesen in der Sturlungenzeit*, *Abhandlungen der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse*, 1912, no. 4 (Berlin, 1912); William Ian Miller, "Avoiding legal Judgment: The Submission of Disputes to Arbitration in Medieval Iceland," *The American Journal of Legal History* 28 (1984): 951-34; Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982) and "Dispute Resolution in the Sagas" *Gripla* 6 (1984).

28. For a discussion of the social context of the sagas in light of several theories of saga structure, see my "Saga Form, Oral Prehistory, and the Icelandic Social Context," *New Literary History* 16 (1984-1985): 153-173.

29. Bookprosists also exaggerate the violence and disruption of the thirteenth century. However, the strife during this period was not sufficiently severe nor did it last long enough to change the traditional patterns of settlement or to alter radically the underlying social and economic structures. This subject deserves its own study.

30. Björn Sigfússon, "Full goðorð" pp. 48-75.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57

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

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

34. For example Guðmundr Arason's election to the seat at Hólar was one of the most controversial during the Free State, yet even this "appointment" proceeded with little conflict.

35. Ólafur Lárusson "Die Popularklage der Grágás," *Festskrift for Otto Hjalmar Granfelt* (Helsingfors: Ab. F. Tilgman, 1934), pp. 87-101. Also see Magnús Stefánsson, "Kirkjuvald eflist," pp. 70-71.

36. "Í júní 1253," *Diplomatarium Islandicum: Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn* (Copenhagen: S. L. Möller and Reykjavík: Hinu íslenska bókmenntafélagi, 1857-1952), Vol. 1, p. 1, and "Árna saga biskups," ch. 29, same vol., p. 720.

37. Jón Jóhannesson, *History*, pp. 220-221.

38. Ulrich Stutz contends that among the pre-Christian Germanic peoples on the continent, temples were also administered by the man on whose land they stood, and this individual profited from the dues paid to the temple. In the absence of extensive continental sources, however, Stutz bases his view on Icelandic information. Ulrich Stutz, *Geschichte des kirchlichen Benefizialwesens von seinen Anfängen bis auf die Zeit Alexanders III* (1985, reprint Aalen: Scientia, 1961), pp. 89-95.

39. Magnús Mar Lárusson, "Kloster," *Kulturhistoriskt Lexikon for nordisk medeltid*, vol. 8 (Malmö: Allhems, 1963), cols. 544-546; Hermann Nilsson, "Stofnun Þingeyraklausturs" in *Tólfta öldin þattir um menu og malfni* (Reykjavík, Prentsmiðja Jóns Helga-sonar, 1970), pp. 92-102. The official date for the opening of the þingeyrar monastery is 1133; the earlier date being more an hypothesis than a fact.

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

41. Helgi Þorláksson, "Urbaniseringstendenser," pp. 173-174.

42. *Ibid.* p. 174.