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# The Age of the Sturlungs

by JESSE L. BYOCK

The thirteenth century occupies a special place in Icelandic history. At midcentury (1262-1264) Iceland lost its independence to Norway, and the Old Icelandic Free State, founded more than three centuries earlier (ca. 930), came to an end. The decades immediately preceding the end of the Free State, especially from the early 1220s to the 1260s, have come to be called the *Sturlungaöld*, the age of the Sturlungs, a major family of the period. More than any other scholar, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has shaped our current understanding of this era. In his famous book, *The Age of the Sturlungs*,<sup>1</sup> Sveinsson depicts a time of radical change in Iceland, a distinct "age" largely detached from earlier centuries.

Although I do not doubt the importance of Sveinsson's study — in fact I admire it in many ways — I question the wisdom of viewing the Sturlung years as a separate age. As I propose in this article, I believe that Sveinsson's emphasis on the separateness of these decades skews our perception of the thirteenth century.<sup>2</sup> To look at these years as a distinct age exaggerates the scope of the change that Iceland underwent in the thirteenth century and obscures the fact that continuity rather than discontinuity is the most consistent element in Iceland's medieval history. Sveinsson in eloquent prose depicts the thirteenth century as a time of national collapse:

In the fourth decade of the thirteenth century events begin to move more swiftly, like a great river encountering a sudden declivity in its

<sup>1</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Sturlungaöld. Drög um íslenska menningu á þrettándu Old* (Reykjavík, 1940), trans. Jóhann S. Hannesson as *The Age of the Sturlungs. Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century*, *Islandica* 36 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> Sveinsson's view on the separateness of these decades serves as a keystone of the book-prose theory of the sagas' late literary origin.

course; nothing can any longer hold them back. Quarrels, incursions, manslaughter, battles, burnings. The districts change rulers constantly. One year a chieftain has most of the country in his power, the next he has gone abroad [to Norway] to the royal court, and his greatest enemy is in complete control. The time-honored bonds that link thingman and goði creak under the strain. All the pristine virtues totter. The extravagant ambition of the chieftains overthrows the nation's independence.<sup>3</sup>

A strong Icelandic nationalist, who lived at the time when modern Iceland was struggling to establish its independence from Denmark, Sveinsson highlights the drama of medieval Iceland's loss of independence.<sup>4</sup> In the 1930s when *The Age of the Sturlungs* was written and in 1940 when published, modern Iceland had not yet achieved independence. Focusing on the tragedy of lost nationhood, Sveinsson continues:

The river [metaphorically Iceland in its troubles] rushes down the rapids; its course levels out — but by then the nation has become subject to a foreigner. The quarrels of the chieftains grow quiet — but it is the quiet of death.<sup>5</sup>

Although fratricidal conflict or a loss of national independence evokes a special sense of repugnance, too much can be made of civil disorder; this has been done in assessments of Iceland's age of the Sturlungs. The troubled thirteenth century saw changes in the balance of power in Icelandic society, but the process of change never reached completion. The internal strife of the Sturlung years did not last long enough, nor was it of sufficient intensity, to uproot the traditional pattern of settlement or the centuries-old social and economic structure of Iceland. There were of course evolutionary developments. The *stórhöfðingjar* (sing. *stúrhöfðingi*), literally "large leaders," arising in the late twelfth century from

<sup>3</sup>Sveinsson, *Sturlungs*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Icelandic nationalism played an important role in shaping the views of the Icelandic bookproseists. Vésteinn Ólason, "Bókmenntarýni Sigurðar Nordals," *Tímarit máls og menningar* 45/ 1 (1984), p. 7; J. L. Byock, "Cultural Continuity, the Church, and the Concept of Independent Ages in Medieval Iceland," *Skandinavistik* 15/1 (1985), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Sveinsson, *Sturlungs*, p. 5.

among the *goðar* (chieftains), became even more distinct from the old group of chieftains than they had been in previous decades.

In spite of the fact that they continued to call themselves *goðar*, the *stórhöfðingjar* formed a new social class. They sought to achieve executive power for themselves and to establish a new and more hierarchical political structure. Yet, as I point out later, the change brought on by the *stórhöfðingjar* advancing to a new level in the social order was less of an upheaval than it might have been. In many instances the traditional system of reciprocity<sup>6</sup> between farmers and their local leaders remained in operation until the Free State came to an end or even longer. This continuity in the arrangement of the local power structure was possible because, as the *stórhöfðingjar* turned to other concerns, prominent farmers began fulfilling many of the roles that had formerly been prerogatives of the *goðar*. These rising local leaders among the farmers (*bændr*, sing. *bóndi*) were known as *stórbændr* (sing. *stórbóndi*), literally "large farmers," and were the type of ambitious upwardly mobile individuals, such as Þorgils Oddason á Staðarhóli and Þórðr Gilsson á Staðarfelli, who in earlier centuries had won entrance into the ranks of the traditional chieftains.

In many instances the sources portray the thirteenth century as being more violent than it actually was. *Sturlunga saga*,<sup>7</sup> the major source for this period, does not portray a contented people. This compilation of twelfth- and thirteenth-century sagas dwells on violence and on the greedy pursuit of political power which characterized the lives of the thirteenth-century *stórhöfðingjar*. The picture is described with particular clarity in *Íslendinga saga*, the central and longest saga in the *Sturlunga* compilation. The author of *Íslendinga saga*, Sturla Þórðarson, was himself a member of the Sturlung family. As a powerful *stórhöfðingi* he played an active role in the events of the last decades of the Free State. A man whose fortunes as a leader alternately rose and fell, Sturla had firsthand experience of the dangers and treacheries about which he wrote.

Sturla Þórðarson probably wrote *Íslendinga saga* at the end of his life, in the years 1271-1284, that is, in the period after the Icelanders had submitted to Norwegian overlordship. Sturla's work is not a general history

<sup>6</sup>L. J. L. Byock. "Government Order in Early Medieval Iceland," *Viator* 17 (1986).

<sup>7</sup>*Sturlunga Saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnboğason, and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946).

of the thirteenth century but a retrospective description of the struggle for power among leaders in the preceding half century. Although Sturla mentions a large number of *bændr* and their *stórbændr* leaders, his readers rarely catch anything more than a brief glimpse of individual farmers. Instead, Sturla as a historian is concerned principally with the activities and the fate of his own new class, the *stórhöfðingjar*. In particular he recounts the fortunes of members of his large and quarrelsome family.

Sturla begins *Íslendinga saga* with the death in 1183 of the grandfather whose name he carried, the chieftain Sturla Þórðarson from Hvammr í Dölum in the Western Quarter. A brutal and ambitious man, the elder Sturla (known as Hvamm Sturla) rose from obscurity to national prominence. The man who gave his name to the family sired three unusually capable and competitive sons: Þórðr (the author's father), Snorri, and Sighvatr. In author Sturla's hands these kinsmen who are the center of his saga history come alive, as Stéfan Einarsson writes:

His [Sturla's] characters breathe real life. In the foreground are full-scale portraits of the actors of the tragic drama, the Sturlungs. There is his quiet but efficient father Þórðr r, the brilliant, ambitious, but weak-kneed Snorri, and the humorous realistic man of action, Sighvatr, who loves to take the wind out of the sails of his ambitious brother. But Snorri's ambitious intrigues never put the mark as high as the foolhardiness of his nephew Sturla Sighvatsson. Aiming to subdue the country in one fell swoop, he foundered on the determined resistance of the prudent and cunning Gizurr Þorvaldsson [leader of the opposing Haukdælir family] who all but wiped out the Sturlungs: father and son, Sighvatr and Sturla, and the greatest of them all, Snorri Sturluson.<sup>8</sup>

The aspirations and the ultimate fate of the numerous offspring and kinsmen of the Sturlusons is likewise a common theme in most of the other sagas in the Sturlunga compilation, which describe the last decades of the Free State.

Neither Sturla nor the authors of the later sagas in the Sturlunga compilation, such as *Þórðar saga kakala* and *Þorgils saga skarða*, try to hide

<sup>8</sup> Stéfan Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), p. 155.

or even to soften the cruel realities of political intrigue. The compilation is largely a political history of a few powerful families, whose fortunes *Sturlunga saga* follows closely over generations. While accepting *Sturlunga saga* as a magnificent historical and literary document, we should not lose sight of its narrow scope. I am not implying that the disturbances of the thirteenth century were unimportant. On the contrary, outbreaks of violence in the fourth through the sixth decades of the thirteenth century were serious enough at times to threaten real civil war. To read too much into such disturbances, however, distorts the sense of the continuity of Icelandic life.<sup>9</sup>

A problem with Sveinsson's argument is that the facts upon which he bases his conclusions are not easily discerned. In the entire period from 1208 to 1260, Sveinsson estimates that only 350 men were "killed in battle or executed."<sup>10</sup> We might guess that during this fifty-year period more men than that were run over by their own horses. Even a figure many times larger would be absurdly low for fifty years in which the country was supposedly ravaged by internal battling. Medieval Scandinavians knew only too well how to fight, and 350 fatalities could easily have been accounted for in a few sizable encounters. One has only to look to contemporaneous mainland Scandinavia for examples of battles and wars that left many dead.

Why should one postulate the prevalence of warfare on the one hand and then assume that Iceland was too small for major bloodletting? Thirteenth-century Icelandic leaders regularly amassed forces of armed farmers numbering in the hundreds and sometimes, we are told, even exceeding a thousand. Heavy losses could of course be expected if such groups were employed for more than a routine show of force.<sup>11</sup> In 1243 Þórðr kakali gathered a force of over 1,400 men, yet his kinsmen Sturla Þórðarson, Böðvarr Þórðarson, and Þorleifr Þórðarson, who contributed

<sup>9</sup> Among historians today there is a growing awareness that the harshest reports of destructive warfare in the thirteenth-century sagas are probably exaggerations. For instance, see Gunnar Karlsson, "Frá þjóðveldi til konungsríkis," in *Saga Islands*, ed. Sigurður Linda!, vol. 2, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Sögufélag, 1975), p. 45, where Karlsson doubts the extent of devastation which *Þórðar saga kakala* ascribes to Kolbeinn ungi's raid on the West Fjords in 1244.

<sup>10</sup> Sveinsson, *Sturlunga*, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> J. L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 101-102.

to the force, said they "would not help him in forays against others, but they would ride to the *þing* with him in the summer and aid him in each action so that he might obtain his due." As often in such instances the force was never employed; when Þórðr learned that his enemy Kolbeinn was riding toward him with only a few men, "he dispersed his forces. Böðvarr and Þorleifr went home, and Þórðr and Sturla rode to the West-fjörds" (*Sturl. 2, Þórðar saga kakala*, ch. 19).

As suggested by the casualty figures and, more important, by the silence of otherwise detailed sources, actual battles took place only on rare occasions and, when they did, were limited in extent. With a population numbering anywhere from 40,000 to 60,000, Iceland had no shortage of able-bodied men to fight had opposing groups really caused large-scale civil disorder. Certainly it cannot be argued that Icelanders were ignorant of the techniques of warfare. Generations of Icelanders pursued military careers during the Viking period. Later they fought on different sides of the vicious civil wars that plagued Norway during the twelfth century. One of the many examples is the account in *Prests saga Guðmundar góða* of the military careers of the father and the uncle of Bishop Guðmundr Arason. Both men fought in Norway in the mid-twelfth century, and Ari, the bishop's father, died in 1166 while saving the life of Earl Erlingr, the father of King Magnús.<sup>12</sup>

Leaving Sveinsson's arguments aside, I suggest that there are other good reasons for reevaluating the extent of the disruptions in the thirteenth century. For example, the limited destruction to property is an indication that the actual state of affairs during the *Sturlungaöld* was less violent than is often assumed. Up to the end of the Free State, Iceland remained a completely rural society. This is a fact of major importance in understanding its history, culture, and written sources. In prolonged civil disorder on the scale assumed by some scholars, incursions, battles, man-slaughters, and other forms of organized violence would quickly have devastated the dispersed farmsteads on which the island's social and economic order depended. In that event the continuity that the community maintained with its past might have been broken. Certainly in such a situation clever or lucky individuals would have prospered to an unusual degree while misery was afflicting the many. Secular and clerical sources, however, say nothing of such developments.

<sup>12</sup> *Sturl. t., Prests saga Guðmundar góða*, chs. 1-2.

Living so far to the north, Iceland's medieval population existed in a delicate balance between prosperity and famine. The operation of scattered farmsteads required a pattern of labor which could not survive repeated disruptions, and success depended on uninterrupted preparation for the future. The destruction of even one large farmstead was a catastrophe that went far beyond the mere ruin of the buildings. Without an adequate store of fodder and a sufficient supply of food, neither livestock nor people could survive the seven hard months of winter. In normal times of need farmers may or may not have been able to turn for aid to their immediate neighbors, who formed the small communal unit called a *hreppr*; little is known about the actual functioning of this unit. The *hreppr* insurance mentioned in the thirteenth-century laws (*Grágás* II, 258-261),<sup>13</sup> if indeed it routinely worked, clearly was viable only for such occurrences as an occasional fire or a limited outbreak of murrain.

The capacity of local farmers to withstand disaster would have been vitiated had even part of an area been destroyed or subjected to continuous plundering, for Icelandic society had no reserve of resources upon which to call. Merchant towns, which could have acquired supplies or extended credit during times of trouble, did not exist. None of the sources show evidence that a class of war profiteers emerged to take advantage of widespread distress.

Large-scale civil disturbances would certainly have engendered a readily discernible change in the pattern of settlement. Even moderate civil war would have forced farmers to abandon indefensible farmsteads and to resettle in larger, more secure communities. Only in fortified communities — a standard form of settlement throughout medieval Europe — would farmers have been able to defend and feed themselves and their families. But there is no evidence of any major alteration in Icelandic settlement patterns. To the contrary, both archaeological evidence and written records show a continuous habitation of dispersed farmsteads un-

<sup>13</sup> The standard edition of *Grágás*, the thirteenth-century collection of Free State laws, was edited by Vilhjálmur Finsen and published in three volumes. Ia and Ib: *Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid, udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift* (Copenhagen: Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852); II: *Grágás efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol., Staðarhólsbók* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1879); and III: *Grágás: Stykker, som findes i del Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 351 fol. Skálholtsbók og en Bakke andre Haandskrifter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1883). *Grágás* is abbreviated *GO*, and citations are given by volume and page number.

disturbed for centuries. After carefully considering settlement patterns, the historian Helgi Þorláksson writes that throughout the existence of the Free State scarcely any movement toward development of permanently settled hamlets is discernible:

På Island ble det aldri i middelalderen utviklet permanent folkesatte tettsteder med spesialiserte økonomiske funksjoner, rettslig og administrativt utskilt fra omlandet. Sesongbetont handel ved de store havneplassene førte til de klareste urbaniseringstendensene, etter hvert ved siden av utviklingen av de kirkelige sentra. Men disse tendensene var lite merkbare.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the feuds of the *stórhöfðingjar*, Iceland in the mid-thirteenth century did not differ fundamentally from the society of earlier times. In a centuries-old pattern, the society was constructed around several thousand free and relatively well-off householders called *þingfararakaupsbændr*. These "thingtax-paying farmers" qualified for full freemen's rights through the possession of a minimum amount of property (*GG* Ia, 159; II, 320; III, 173, 431-432), and on their lands the majority of the population lived. Within this socially conservative context, the farmers' possession of family lands and Iceland's traditional form of settlement remained stable. This state of affairs continued during the turmoil of the age of the Sturlungs and even for decades beyond the loss of independence.

From the tenth century on, farmers had attached themselves to local leaders for reasons of kinship, friendship, or expediency. In the mid-thirteenth century the farmers grouped behind the emerging *stórbændr* were still a major political force.<sup>15</sup> Some of these *stórbændr* attained district-wide influence, as, for example, Broddi Þorleifsson á Hofi in Skagafjörður, Ásgrímr Bergþórsson í Kallaðarnesi in Steingrímsfjörður, Gísli Markússon í Bæ on Rauðasandur, Ögmundur Helgason í Kirkjubæ in

<sup>14</sup> Helgi Þorláksson, "Urbaniseringstendenser på Island i middelalderen," in *Urbaniseringsprosessen i Norden: Det XVII. nordiske historikernote*, vol. 1, *Middelaldersteder*, ed. Grethe Authén Blom (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977), p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> For differing views on the relationship between *stórbændr* and *stórhöfðingjar* see Helgi Þorláksson, "Stórbændur gegn goðum: Hugleiðingar um goðavald, konungsveld og sjálfbræðishug bænda um miðbik 13. aldar," in *Söguslóðir: afmælisrit helgað Olafi Hanssyni sjönu gun 18. September 1979*, ed. Bergsteinn Jónsson, Einar Laxness, and Heimir Þorleifsson (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1979): 227-250; Gunnar Karlsson, "Völd og auður á 13. öld," *Saga* 18 (1980): 5-30.

Síða, Þorvarðr Þórðarson í Saurbæ in Eyjafjörður, Einarr Halldórsson from Snæfellsnes, and Hallr Jónsson á Möðruvöllum in Eyjafjörður. Many of these local leaders married into *stórhöfðingjar* families. For example, Broddi Þorleifsson married the illegitimate sister of Kolbeinn ungi of the Ásbirning family. Although the sources tell us the connection of these *bændr* to the *stórhöfðingjar*, they are generally silent about the family history of such local leaders. We know nothing, for instance, about the family origins of Broddi Þorleifsson. Similarly, the sources say almost nothing about Þorvarðr Þórðarson's background, although we know a little more about the family of Hallr Jónsson. These three *bændr* played crucial roles in events in Skagafjörður and Eyjafjörður in the mid 1250s when the *bændr* of these regions refused for a while to accept *stórhöfðingjar* as their leaders.

In surfacing as important leaders the *stórbændr* did not create a new rank; rather, they assumed the local authority abandoned by the *stórhöfðingjar*. For their part, the *stórhöfðingjar* moved up the ladder.<sup>16</sup> Abandoning the traditional interests of the *goðar* in local administration, they first aspired to regional control in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Later, from around 1230 to 1262 (i.e., the central years of the Sturlung period), *stórhöfðingjar* attempted to extend their spheres of influence over ever larger geographical areas. With dreams of ruling princely domains, they tried to establish a new level of power by creating positions of executive authority, positions that for centuries had been only a remote possibility never realized in Iceland's kingless society. Among the most ambitious of these leaders, a major struggle for national power ensued.

Although assuming on occasion pretensions of rulers, the *stórhöfðingjar* did not succeed in establishing effective regional states. Especially in the last decades of the Free State, their careers tended to be unnaturally short and their hold on power insecure. Rather than implanting hierarchical administrations dependent on sheriffs, bailiffs, and other functionaries, individual leaders usually had little choice but to leave intact the traditional forms of government. As they were frequently forced to rely on their families for support, which usually had no preestablished system of hierarchy and which, like the Sturlungs, were not cohesive political

<sup>16</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, "Goðar og bændur," *Saga* 10 (1972): 42-43, reaches a similar conclusion

groups, their efforts at times opened a Pandora's box of problems. Even if one family did gain control of several chieftaincies, these *goðorð* were often distributed among different relatives who might be uncooperative and, on occasion, might even be inimical. Sturla Sighvatsson, for example, tortured and maimed his cousin Órækja Snorrason during a dispute between members of the Sturlung family.

Besides needing family members as political allies, aspiring leaders had to depend on supportive *stórbændr* to serve as intermediaries between themselves and the farmers.<sup>17</sup> In this situation the *stórhöfðingjar* faced problems. The *stórbændr* often had ambitions of their own and at crucial moments could be undependable. Moreover, there was no long-standing tradition among free farmers of honoring orders contrary to their wishes. The popular family sagas and the laws stressed the rights and the dignity of free farmers, who probably were well aware that the claims of the *stórhöfðingjar* ran counter to the letter and spirit of the law. Although at times it may have been in their self-interest for the *stórbændr* and their supporters to follow individual *stórhöfðingjar*, there were limits to their fidelity.

After the early 1230s, with growing frequency, Icelandic leaders became retainers (*hirdmenn* or *handgengnir menn*) of the Norwegian King Hákon Hákonarson (1217-1263). The readiness of ambitious individuals to accept the status of royal followers was owing to their competitiveness with one another; once a few of them had taken the step, thereby claiming increased authority, many others felt compelled to follow. As liege men, leaders such as Gizurr Þorvaldsson, Þórðr kakali, Þorgils skarði and Finn-Þjórn Helgason (a rising farmer) often acted in the king's name and were aided by his authority. In turning to the king, aggressive Icelanders were seeking to escape from the confining structures of an island society that offered them only vague rights to command and little power to tax.

Whatever their aspirations, the *stórhöfðingjar* lacked the right to claim the authority enjoyed in other countries by hereditary nobility. Acting as *supra-goðar*, they exercised regional control through the expedient, but often inefficient means of directing several older chieftaincies. This situation, so tied as it was to the past, offered the new leaders little effective military backing. Þórðr kakali, one of the most capable administrators

<sup>17</sup> Karlsson discusses this point in "Goðar of bændur," and in *Frá þjóðveldi til konungsríkis* in *Saga Íslands*, vol. 2, p. 47. See also Þorláksson, "Stórbændur gegn goðum."

among the *stórhöfðingjar*, assembled for a time a group of ten trained soldiers called *gestir*, and some of the other leaders had at times a few bodyguards. None of the *stórhöfðingjar* commanded a standing army or had the ability to maintain garrisons. Instead they relied on poorly equipped, badly trained and often forced levies of farmers whose reliability was questionable.

Even Þórðr kakali, who for a brief period had almost all of Iceland under his control, was unable to circumvent tradition. In the late 1240s Þórðr tried, with some success, to establish a rudimentary system of functionaries, among them his *gestir*; when the king demanded that he come to Norway in 1250, Þórðr complied and placed Hráni Koðránsson in authority over Eyjafjörður and Eyjólfur ofsi Þorsteinsson over Skagafjörður. Apparently neither of these trusted supporters came from major families. Eyjólfur's father was a *bondi* from Vatnsdalr, and nothing is known of Hráni's father's family. But, in the struggles of the next few years (1250-1255) the power of Þórðr and his deputies was swept away.

Only at the very end of the Free State in 1258 did King Hákon appoint Gizurr Þorvaldsson earl.<sup>18</sup> According to *Íslendinga saga* the king placed under the management of this most successful of the *stórhöfðingjar* all of the Southern Quarter, the Northern Quarter and all of Borgarfjörður. Gizurr quickly set out to establish a political structure based on vassalage; however, as we can see from hindsight, his options were limited from the beginning. The earl's authority depended on the king, who had no intention of losing his growing authority in Iceland to a native lord. The earldom proved to be only a temporary political experiment. It brought about no fundamental rearrangement of the social or political order and its authority was never extended over the whole of the country; its influence was quickly overshadowed by the submission of the Icelanders in 1262-1264 to the king. After Gizurr's death in 1268 there were no more earls exercising power in Iceland.<sup>19</sup>

To what extent did the struggles toward the end of the Free State to fill

<sup>18</sup> Sturla Þórðarson reports in *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 143) that in a secret meeting with Hertogi (Duke) Skúli Bárðarson in 1239, Snorri Sturluson received the title of earl. The next year the Duke's attempt to seize power ended with his death. In Iceland nothing came of Snorri's earldom if in fact it ever existed.

<sup>19</sup> Two other men are later called Icelandic earls in the sources. One was a Norwegian baron named Auðun Hugleiksson hestekorn, the other was an Icelander named Kolbeinn Bjarnason. Little is known about these men, both of whom were killed in the early 1300s.

a position at the top — which never really existed — alter Icelandic society? Two major factors argue that the island's traditional order, however strained, remained unbroken. The first is the continued importance of the farmers and their local leaders. The second is the inability of the *stórhöfðingjar* to set up a power base sufficient to ensure their independence from the king of Norway.

Ironically, the attempts by the *stórhöfðingjar* to create their own positions of executive authority were halted by their ally the Norwegian Crown. In playing off one Icelandic retainer against another, King Hákon weakened the native Icelandic leaders. Especially in the last few years of the Free State he used churchmen loyal to Norway, a series of royal messengers, and the earl, who for a time seems to have assumed that he was more independent than he actually was. Hákon was so successful in interjecting uncertainty into the Icelandic political situation that he succeeded in turning native antagonists such as Earl Gizurr and Hrafn Oddsson against each other at a time when both claimed to be acting in the king's interest. Finally even *stórhöfðingjar* such as the Oddaverjar in the South, and *stórbændr* and *bændr* throughout the island were willing to accept a foreign ruler who promised to end the *stórhöfðingjar's* quarrels. We can see this change during the very last few years of the Free State in the Icelanders' rapid abandonment of their resistance to the payment of tribute to the king.

At the Althing in 1262 and then during the next two years at local assemblies held throughout the country the Icelanders agreed to become subjects of the Norwegian Crown.<sup>20</sup> Each *þingfararkaupsbóndi* was to pay to the king a nominal tribute (in perpetuity) in return for the king's respect for Iceland's laws and a promise to maintain peace. According to the Old Covenant (*Gamli Sáttmáli*), the agreement to which representatives from the northern and southern regions swore allegiance,<sup>21</sup> the

<sup>20</sup> Björn Þorsteinsson and Sigurður Línadal, "Noregskonungur hylltur," in "Lögfesting konungsvalds," *Saga íslands*, vol. 3, pp. 34-40; Björn Þorsteinsson, *Íslensk miðaldasaga* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1978), pp. 174-179. See also Björn Sigfússon, "Gamli sáttmáli endursvarinn 1302," *Sjötiú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni*, ed. Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Arna Magnússonar, 1977), pp. 121-137.

<sup>21</sup> From 1262 to 1264, the remainder of the Icelanders swore allegiance to the king, using this or a similar covenant. For different manuscript versions of the treaty see *DiplomaTarium Alan-* (*dicum: Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn*, vol. 1, pt. 3 (Copenhagen: S. L. Willer, 1862), pp. 619-625; vol. 9 (Reykjavík: Hinu íslenzka bókmentafélagi, 1909-1913), pp. 1-4; vol. 10 (1911-1921), pp. 58. I cite the A version (vol. 1, pp. 620-621) throughout.

tribute was twenty ells of homespun.<sup>22</sup> As that was approximately the same as the thing tax (*þingfarar kaup*) which the *bændr* had previously paid to their leaders, no new burden was imposed on them.<sup>23</sup> The major difference was that the tax now went to the Crown and to the Norwegian-organized administration, staffed initially by Icelanders, instead of to individual chieftains.<sup>24</sup> As part of the agreement all the chieftaincies came into the possession of the king.

Central to the Icelanders' side of the accord was the guarantee that the king would show deference to the Icelanders: "In return the king shall let us enjoy peace and the Icelandic laws" ("Hier j mot skal konungr lata oss naa fridi og islenskum laugum").<sup>25</sup> The last phrase seems not to have meant that existing Free State laws could not be altered, but that the Icelanders would have the right to accept or reject new legislation. Thus the traditional legislative power remained with the Icelanders, even though the king was free to modify older laws or to propose new ones.

By agreeing to the covenant, the Icelanders accepted a governmental authority more centralized than any they had previously known. Yet in doing so they made it clear to the Norwegian Crown that the treaty must confirm the maintenance of traditional practices. In clear language the covenant specifies that the Icelanders and their descendants were to remain loyal to the Norwegian king only so long as he and his heirs continued to honor Norway's commitments. Should the Crown fail to adhere to its obligations to the satisfaction "of the best men" in Iceland, the agreement would be considered broken: "Skulu vier og vorir arfar hallda med ydur allan trunad medan bier og ydrir arfar hallda vid oss Þessa Satar gjort. En lausar of bun ryfst at beztu man[n]a yfir syn."<sup>26</sup>

In choosing to pay a nominal tax to the Norwegian king, the *bændr* and their leaders were exercising their traditional rights and terminating a pe-

<sup>22</sup> Þat var sam mæli bænda fyrir nordan land og sunan. 1. at þeir jatudu æfinlegan skatt herra N. konungi land og þegna med suordum Eidi .xx. alnir huer saa madr sem þingfarar kaupi as at gegna. (*Dipl. Isl. 1*, p. 620).

<sup>23</sup> A difference was that the new tax was fixed, the same amount applying for all *þing farar-kaupsbcendr*. The old *þingfarar kaup* varied somewhat.

<sup>24</sup> The tax established a precedent for regularly sending funds abroad to the Norwegian government. In later periods this practice was to have an important effect on Iceland's wellbeing.

<sup>25</sup> *Dipl. Isl. 1*, p. 620.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

riod of internal disorder. Had the Icelanders not accepted the king's promise to end the strife among *stórhöfðingjar*, Iceland probably would have drifted into a period of devastating civil war and social upheaval. Instead, with a mutual understanding in force Iceland enjoyed peace, stability, and continuity with its past, at least through the end of the thirteenth century.

In the fourteenth century the treaty with Norway began to have unhappy consequences for the Icelanders. The power of the Crown had increased so much that it could ignore some of the guarantees given earlier.<sup>27</sup> But in the 1260s the agreement had not seemed so one-sided. In many respects it simply reaffirmed a long-standing relationship between Iceland and Norway; in others it was actually an improvement for the Icelanders. The land dues that Icelanders since the late ninth century had paid to the Crown when leaving or entering Norway were abolished. More important, the traditional rights that Icelanders enjoyed in Norway were reaffirmed.<sup>28</sup> These rights, formally established two centuries earlier during the reign of Ólafr the Saint (1014-1030), were contained in the only other treaty concluded between the Icelanders and a foreign ruler (*GG Ib*, 195-197).

Loss of independence is especially distasteful to the twentieth-century mind. Yet in the view of the mid-thirteenth-century Icelander, the agreement to pay a nominal tribute to the Norwegian Crown was, in light of the alternatives, a reasonable decision. Not wholly unlike the previous chieftain-thingman relationship, the covenant established a personal contract. As a negotiated end to violence formalized at the local assemblies, the agreement was fully within the Icelandic practice of compromise, which

<sup>27</sup> The Norwegian empire builder King Hákon Hákonarson died in 1263. To a large degree the autonomy that Iceland enjoyed in the later thirteenth century can be attributed to the lack of aggressiveness of Hákon's successors, especially his son King Magnús lagabætir (d. 1280). Important changes were instituted in 1281 when the Crown introduced a new law code called *Jónsbók*. More effectively than *Jár nsíða*, the previous and unpopular Norwegian lawbook introduced in 1271 and soon withdrawn, *Jónsbók* altered important aspects of the islanders' law to conform to contemporary Norwegian practice. Before its adoption, *Jónsbók*, which retained many traditional Icelandic features, was openly discussed among the Icelanders. In the decades that immediately followed, the Crown generally refrained from repressive use of its new powers.

<sup>28</sup> 6. Slikan rett skulu islenskir menn hala j noregi sem þaa er þeir hafa bestan haft og bier hafit sjalfir bodit j ydrum bref[u]m og at ballða fridi yfir ass so sein Gud gefr ydr framaztt afl til. Article Six, *Dipl. Isl.* 1, p. 620.

for centuries characterized the islanders' approach to the settlement of disputes. The Icelanders may have hoped that the agreement was only temporary; the king was an ocean away, and Norwegian royalty did not have a history of consistent power or stability. By accepting a distant suzerain the *bændr* retained their local traditions and leaders. They rid themselves of the destabilizing infighting and the most unreasonable pretensions of the *stórhöfðingjar*. What they gained thereby was not "the quiet of death."

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