

Guðmundur Arason and the End of the Commonwealth

But to return to the march of events. No figure embodies the causes that led to the dissolution of the Commonwealth more than Guðmundur Arason (1160–1237), bishop of Hólar from 1203 until his death. He was a paradoxical character. Like Bishop Þorlákur of Skálholt he remained a lifelong celibate, and set himself with inflexible courage to carry out the dictates of the Roman Church in his diocese. But he did not always act intelligently. Unlike Bishop Þorlákur before him, he seems to have lacked any sense of timing or of the need for compromise in achieving desired ends. His response to opposition in matters of Church policy was to excommunicate his opponents. His obstinacy and intransigence toward the secular chieftains stirred up so much trouble that, as we shall see, it hastened the downfall of the Icelandic Commonwealth in 1262. On the other hand, by the standard of his own convictions, he was a man of immense courage and integrity. He sought power not for his own sake but to advance the cause he believed to be right. Toward the poor he had boundless patience and

compassion. Harsh as he was toward the powerful and influential, he was unable to reject the poor and the miserable even if they were thievish and murderous. Like the Franciscans, he seems to have seen Christ in the poor who came to him for refuge. "God's almsfolk" he called them; and he refused to abandon them, forgiving them their misdeeds over and over again, and feeding and supporting them in ways that seemed utterly imprudent to his worldly detractors. It is no wonder that the common people gave him the appellation of Guðmundur the Good, and after his death attributed many miracles to the power of his sanctity.⁹

Guðmundur was the illegitimate child of a father well known for his talents as a fighter, and was brought up by a stern but concerned uncle. He seems to have received no education other than what he learned from his uncle. He was ordained priest at the age of twenty-four. In his youth he was wild and unruly. But two events, a shipwreck in which he suffered permanent injury and the death of a close friend, totally changed his inner life. He now gave himself unreservedly to God by prayer, asceticism, and service of the poor. He acquired a reputation for miraculous powers of healing, and earned the love and respect of the common people by his concern for their problems.¹⁰ Some of the chieftains admired and befriended him. For a while he served as private chaplain to Kolbeinn Tumason, one of the leading chieftains of the North. When in 1201 the see of Hólar became vacant, Kolbeinn, thinking he could control Guðmundur, used his influence to get him chosen as the next bishop. He was consecrated bishop of Hólar in 1203 by the archbishop of Nidarós, who doubtless urged him strongly to press for the Church's rights in his diocese.

Kolbeinn soon found that he had been grievously mistaken in his estimate of Guðmundur's docility. Guðmundur pressed inflexibly the Church's claim to be independent of lay control, and used the weapon of excommunication against Kolbeinn and other chieftains who opposed him so freely that it soon lost its force and became merely a source of confusion and disarray. His insistence that misbehaving priests in his diocese should come under the jurisdiction of the Church, and not of the civil law of the land, gave rise to bitter altercations between the bishop and Kolbeinn.

The years 1203–1204 were a time of famine and distress in the North, and the plight of the poor moved Bishop Guðmundur deeply. A ragged band of supporters, ranging from monks and priests to beggars, vagabonds, and thieves, gathered around the bishop. He called

them "God's almsfolk," and drained the diocesan resources to support them. Disgusted with the bishop's mismanagement of diocesan affairs, Kolbeinn Tumason in 1208 attacked Hólar with a posse of a few hundred men, intending to take Guðmundur prisoner. The bishop retreated from Hólar to avoid a fight; but his retainers and those of Kolbeinn came to blows. In the ensuing battle Kolbeinn himself was mortally wounded, and the rest of his retainers fled. Now Guðmundur was in control at Hólar for a while. But in the next year a coalition of chieftains, led by Kolbeinn's brother Arnór and including Kolbeinn's brother-in-law Sighvatur Sturluson, attacked him at Hólar once again, with a force of seven hundred men. This time they were successful. The bishop was driven out; those of his followers who sought asylum in the cathedral were dragged out and killed in the churchyard; and the cathedral priests were forced to pronounce the release of the attackers from the Church's ban. Arnór and his fellow-chieftains now took charge of the diocesan seat, and appropriated all its assets. Guðmundur, forbidden to live at Hólar, accepted the invitation of Snorri Sturluson to spend the winter with him at his estate at Reykholt.¹¹ By this time the entire Church life of the diocese of Hólar was in shambles, since Guðmundur had placed his own diocese under a sort of general ban, forbidding all but the most essential sacramental functions. "Wretched and lamentable was the state of the Christian faith there in those days. Some priests abandoned the celebration of mass for fear of God, but some performed it because of their fear of the chieftains, others by their own desire. The cathedral church [at Hólar], the mother, stood in sorrow and grief. . . . Everyone lived just as he pleased, and no one dared to remonstrate."¹²

In the spring of 1211 Bishop Guðmundur attempted to return to Hólar, but his enemies would not allow it, and he had to retreat. As he moved through the districts of his diocese he celebrated masses for the people—but in tents rather than in their local churches, since the mother church at Hólar was still desecrated.

Archbishop Thór Gudmundsson at Nidarós, worried by the disorders at Hólar, summoned Bishop Guðmundur, Arnór, and five other chieftains to come to Norway and present their cases. The death of Archbishop Thór delayed a decision on the issue; and Guðmundur stayed in Norway for four years. He returned to Hólar in 1218, now officially reinstated.

But peace did not last for long. Again a beggarly troop of followers gathered around him at Hólar; and his opponents feared that the as-

sets of the diocese would not be able to cope with this crowd of hangers-on, augmented by the school that Guðmundur had now reopened. Arnór again attacked Hólar, drove out the newcomers, and took the bishop captive. But he escaped, and returned to wander through his own diocese, accompanied as before by a band of trouble-making hangers-on. The local farmers, exasperated by their thievery, finally dispersed the band. Shortly thereafter, hearing that Arnór had died, Guðmundur returned once more to Hólar. Once more he was driven out, this time by Tumi, son of Sighvatur Sturluson. But in 1222, against the bishop's will, his men killed Tumi, whereupon the bishop and his followers retreated to the remote island of Grímsey, off the north coast of Iceland. Now Tumi's father Sighvatur and his brother Sturla Sighvatsson assembled a force, attacked Grímsey, overpowered the defenders, captured Bishop Guðmundur, and sent him to Norway to have his case decided by the archbishop. Shortly thereafter Sturla Sighvatsson made his pilgrimage to Rome (see Chapter V) to obtain absolution for his and his father's mistreatment of the bishop. Bishop Guðmundur remained in Norway for another four years. His case seems to have caused considerable embarrassment to the Church authorities; but finally, in 1226, he returned home with letters of vindication from the archbishop.

Legally Guðmundur was now the victor, but none of the Icelandic chieftains obeyed him or acknowledged his authority. The new chieftain of the north, Kolbeinn the Younger (son of Arnór Tumason), on his own initiative took charge of the management of affairs at Hólar, keeping the bishop under partial confinement, and allowing him only minimal financial resources. Fortunately the quarrels began to wear themselves out. Guðmundur, now advanced in years and losing his sight, lived at Hólar "more like a gentle humble hermit than the meddlesome tough-minded bishop that his enemies depicted."¹³ However, the irregularities of his administration finally prompted Pope Gregory IX himself to intervene and order Guðmundur's removal from office. But in 1237, before the letter of dismissal could arrive, Guðmundur died of old age.

These quarrels between Bishop Guðmundur and the chieftains, over so many years, were not mere momentary upsets; they were fateful for the history of the nation. In them we see the germ of the disintegration of the Commonwealth. In the first place, when the bishop proposed that the matters at issue should be left to the decision of the archbishop of Nidarós in Norway, a precedent was set for the Norwe-

gian Church authorities to interfere in Icelandic affairs; and they were not slow to follow up this precedent with further interventions. Moreover the kings of Norway had long been greedy for political control of Iceland; and the ecclesiastical interference was soon followed by active political interference. In the second place, the bishop's gross disregard of the civil law of the land encouraged other chieftains to show similar disregard for it; and this eventually proved too great a strain for the social fabric to bear.

There is a certain parallel between the careers of Guðmundur Arason and of Thomas à Becket, archbishop of Canterbury in England whose fierce controversy with King Henry II over the Church's right to control its own affairs led to his murder in 1170. Thomas was canonized in 1173, and the story of his life and martyrdom spread far and wide, becoming very popular in Iceland. Guðmundur was well aware of the parallel between himself and Thomas à Becket; and doubtless he would gladly have accepted a similar martyrdom. But Kolbeinn and the other chieftains, fiercely opposed though they were to his management of Church affairs, at least managed to refrain from butchering him.

From the death of Bishop Guðmundur to the capitulation of 1262, the history of Iceland as recorded in the Sturlunga Saga is largely a succession of intrigues, treacherous murders, and battles, along with a strong undercurrent of yearning by the common people for peace and stability.

By 1262 the people of Iceland were exhausted by the long years of lawlessness. Their own laws, legislated by the Althing but now disregarded by Church and chieftains alike, had proved unequal to the task of maintaining order and stability; and the people in general saw the Church and the Norwegian crown as their only salvation. A remarkable piece of legislation was passed by the Althing in 1253, declaring that "where the laws of God and the laws of the land are in conflict, the laws of God should prevail." In other words the people now looked to the Church to protect them from their own chieftains. In 1262, at the Althing, Gissur Porvaldsson, the Norwegian king's Icelandic agent and collaborator, urged that, for the good of the country, Icelanders should become tax-paying subjects of the Norwegian crown. The people of the majority of the districts agreed to this, and ratified the so-called Old Covenant, which spelled out in detail the future relations between Iceland and Norway. By 1264 all of the districts had agreed to comply with this decision; and the independent Commonwealth had come to an end.