

Sainthood in the Making: The Arduous Path of Guðmundr the Good, Iceland's Uncanonized Saint

Bishop Guðmundr Arason (September 26, 1161–March 16, 1237) was honored by no less than four saga versions on his episcopacy (Karlsson 1983, xxx–clxxxv) and, singularly, also by a saga on his childhood, education, and office as priest. In contradistinction to the vitae, all dating from the fourteenth century, the so-called *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* [Priestsaga of Guðmundr the Good] was composed soon after Guðmundr's death in 1237. Such was the saga's significance that it no longer is extant in its original form. Integrated into the vitae, of which *Guðmundar saga A* represents the original text the most faithfully (Karlsson 1985), *Prestssaga* was also incorporated in *Sturlunga saga* (ca. 1300). Abridged, it thus forms part of the notable collection of sagas that deal with Icelandic history from 1117 to 1264.

The standard modern edition of *Sturlunga saga* presents the work as a whole (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:116–59). In fact, however, the manuscript version is riven apart in four unequal segments. Three of these form part of two other works on the same time period, *Guðmundar saga dýra* and *Íslendinga saga* (Thorsson 1988, 171–74, 176–80, 196–209; chaps. 121–22 [embedded in *Guðmundar saga dýra*], chaps. 125–27 [after the end of *Guðmundar saga dýra*], and chaps. 144–53 [in *Íslendinga saga*]; see Krömmelbein 1994, 45, table 1). While this procedure allowed the compiler to handle the complexity of synchronous events—a problem he acknowledged (Thorsson 1988, 100, chap. 81 “[Um sögu-ritun]”)—it also impaired the structural unity of *Prestssaga*. He obviously thought of *Prestssaga* as significant only in relation to chronologically related events.¹

This paper will argue that the text of *Prestssaga* in the standard edition of *Sturlunga saga* provides insight into the conception of the saga before the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* fractured the text for his own distinct purpose. When seen as a whole, uninterrupted by the transfer of sections of the text, *Prestssaga* conveys a

1. Interestingly, folio 30 of one of the two main manuscripts of *Sturlunga saga*, Reykjarfjarðarbók, AM 122b fol., contains excised chapters of miracles. The manuscript, poorly preserved, contains 30 leaves out of the original 180 (Karlsson 1970, 124–25).

coherent image of (a) Guðmundr's character and personality, and (b) his indisputable claim to sanctity despite the often virulent criticism of his episcopate. Thus, the focus will be on the writer's historical concerns and on literary devices he used to advocate Guðmundr's sanctity and to counter Guðmundr's powerful and vocal critics. For the historical record, he formed a respectful but ostensibly unbiased judgment of Guðmundr from childhood through his tenure as priest and bishop-elect. Within this historical and biographical framework he presented the prevalent criteria that manifested Guðmundr's sanctity. To accomplish his mission, he drew upon an arsenal of literary devices from both learned and native traditions.

The saga is referred to, somewhat unfairly, as a chronicle. Yet it is more than a chronicle, bearing simultaneously the marks of learned tradition and the imprint of indigenous literary culture, as well as displaying a strong sense of family pride (Boyer 1984; Paul 1979, 41; Vitz 1987). The saga's conception originated in, and was sponsored by, possibly two groups: (1) family members insistent upon commemorating Guðmundr's stature despite widespread hostility toward him (Karlsson 1985, 986); (2) a clerical circle² interested in promulgating in particular those signs of Guðmundr's sainthood that were evident before 1203, the date of his confirmation as bishop, when he began to attract notoriety in the exercise of his office. Its writer, however, was clearly trained in traditional saga composition. He was intent on, and adept at, recording the family background that nurtured and, to some extent, accounted for Guðmundr's personality, character, and militant vocation. Equally important was the sense of drama with which the author presented the facts and signs that Guðmundr would and did develop into a saint akin, but superior, to saga heroes.

Structurally, the saga reveals its learned background by organizing narrative matter in the manner of annals³—by years, even by winter, spring, and summer. To modern critics, much of this information is considered to be of dubious value, digressive to the extent that it fractures the coherence of the saga. The writer, however, intended to provide his subject matter with a broader scope, one that would transcend the more narrow geographic confines of Iceland. He therefore embellished his account with facts of wider, more cosmopolitan import. A genealogy, an indispensable feature in saga literature, is extraordinarily elaborate, testifying to the author's interest in the family and to the precision expected of his clerical training. As to substance, his guiding principles were complex. He reconciled known facts on Guðmundr's character, life, and background with exigencies of hagiography and with allusions to Ambrose (?340–397),⁴ the church father and

2. Authorship is uncertain, although Abbot Lambkár Þorgilsson (d. 1249) has been named as a likely candidate (Jóhannesson 1946).

3. For opposite views on the provenance and function of annalistic matter in *Prestssaga* and in extant Icelandic annals, see Einarsdóttir 1964, bilag 4, "Den kronologiske opbygning af Præstesagaen om Guðmund Arason," 331–38, kapitel 19, "Saga og annal," 293–326, and Karlsson 1985, 984.

4. During Guðmundr's life, the life of Ambrose was known. One of the best known monks at the monastery of Þingeyrar and erstwhile supporter of Guðmundr, Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218 or 1219)

saint, whose life provided both an implicit and explicit model for aspects of Guðmundr's life.⁵

The genealogy opens the saga, establishing Guðmundr as a member of an illustrious and contemporaneous family. The genealogy's concentration on immediate family members—no ancestors of the saga age are listed—is unusual in itself. It begins with Guðmundr's grandfather, Þorgeirr Hallason, and continues with his ten surviving children, their marriage partners, lovers, and their legitimate and illegitimate children. The record shows a family well connected—to the Ásbirningar, the Eyrbyggjar, the family of Ari Þorgilsson, the historian (1068–1148), and Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson, Guðmundr's predecessor (1163–1201). The record suggests that, by family connections alone, Guðmundr, though illegitimate, was well positioned to assume a leading role in Icelandic society (cf. Lotter 1979, 325; Walter 1989, 484–85; Vésteinsson 2000, 207).

Equally significant are the entries that in the first four chapters establish the family as adventurous, ambitious, and honored. Some portray individual members as deeply religious in accomplishments and acts. These notices and accounts thus point to Guðmundr's character and calling, providing a family background that encouraged fearlessness yet nurtured religious impulses in a notoriously willful boy (cf. Bragason 1993; Clunies Ross 1993, esp. 382–85).⁶

Two scenes demonstrate that religious impulse led prominent family members to the maintenance of peace. The first is set at a public forum, the thing, the second within a sphere that was both individual and public. After a free-for-all in which gigantic rocks were flung that subsequently proved too heavy to heft, Þorgeirr Hallason evinced his devotion to the Christian injunction of upholding and securing peace. He disclaimed any interest in immediate prosecution of his son's injury. By appealing to the exhortations of the “wisest men”⁷ to lessen rather than to inflame disputes, he succeeded in persuading other chieftains, as well as his

wrote his saga, now lost, in Latin. The earliest translation into Icelandic, a fragment, is extant in a manuscript from the second half of the thirteenth century, AM 655 xxviii a 4^o. For the extant saga and fragments in the vernacular, see Unger 1877, 1:28–54; Foote 1962, fols. 13vb–18vb. For the no longer extant rhymed *officium*, see Bekker-Nielsen 1958. Foote (1962, 21) mentions the signal “church-political bias” in *Ambrosius saga byskups*, which may have inspired Guðmundr to look to Ambrose as a model in the battle for the liberty of the church. At this time Ambrose also enjoyed popularity at the papal court (Stefánsson 1975, 121–22).

5. Lotter (1979, 310) characterizes Paulinus's *Vita Ambrosii* as belonging to a branch of hagiography that either idealizes the protagonist's historical deeds and accomplishments or manifests his virtues. In Guðmundr's case, the compelling historical fact was that Ambrose, by virtue of his position, forced the Roman emperor Theodosius to do penance and to yield to episcopal injunction (*Ambrosius saga byskups* chaps. 11–13; Unger 1877, 1:38–41).

6. See Vauchez 1991a, 26–27, on the presumption that moral and spiritual perfection coalesced only in those of illustrious lineage.

7. Chapter 2, “inir vitrustu menn,” (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:119, line 36). *Guðmundar saga A*, chap. 6 (Karlsson 1983, 25, line 26), chooses an adjective in its phrasing (“hinir gofguztu menn” [the most prominent men]) that denotes societal prominence rather than wisdom and judiciousness as in *Sturlunga saga*.

son, to postpone legal actions for a year (1163–64). That he was able to contain his son Þorvarðr, a fearless and strong-willed former warrior at the Norwegian court, reveals an authority based as much on the strength of his spiritual guidance as on his seniority.

The second related incident demonstrates a genuine religious commitment to peace also in Þorvarðr. In an attempt to save his life, the man outlawed for injuring Þorvarðr “brought Þorvarðr his head.” This was a risky legal move that relied on Þorvarðr’s composure and magnanimity. For Þorvarðr, the timing, a holy day, was crucial. The outlaw appeared on the eve of the traditional day of reconciliation, Maundy Thursday (Schmitz 1898, 43).⁸ This fact prompted Þorvarðr not only to forgive his assailant but also to award him with the gift of a horse, thus breaking a predictable cycle of bloodshed and revenge (chaps. 2–3; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:119–120, 122).

The significance of these episodes is genealogical as well as apologetic. They point to a family tradition of containing and restraining conflicts in the name of religion. This tradition served as a credible defense against the accusation that, during his long episcopacy, Guðmundr’s intemperance and zeal caused public turbulence. Also he was committed to peace, as Sturla Þórðarson would record in detailing the conflict in his *Íslendinga saga*. As a man of the cloth, he suffered the mayhem perpetrated against him, yet was also impotent, unable and unwilling by temperament, to prevent it being waged in his name and for his cause.

The family’s religiosity is also evident, first in the religious calling of some members and second in signs perceived after the death of two of Þorvarðr’s brothers. Þorgeirr himself decided late in life to enter a monastery. Þorvarðr died a monk (chap. 4; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:123–24; Storm 1888, *Annales regii (C)*, 123, in the year 1207). Two of Þorgeirr’s sons were clerics and childless, one a monk, the other a priest. The priest, Ingimundr, was learned. Distinguished and adventurous, he was married briefly to a daughter of a prominent family, the Ásbirningar. Ingimundr later fostered Guðmundr, whose chastity was never impugned, even by his worst enemies. The mere mention of childlessness suggests that these two sons were committed, the one to celibacy, the other to sexual abstinence, as tokens of piety (cf. Lotter 1979, 324; Glasser 1981, 17–18).

While the saga normally records deaths, occasionally also their circumstances, deaths with religious significance receive greater attention. Within the family, three are singled out: those of Þorgeirr, his oldest son Einarr, and Ingimundr. In a necrological entry, Þorgeirr’s death is associated with a sacred event (chap. 4; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:123–24). Noting Þorgeirr’s state as monk, the author commemorates his death (1171), directly after that of Thomas à Becket, an archbishop with whom Guðmundr would be compared. The

8. In an inclusive definition of political acts, Schaller points out that actions undertaken on holy days are considered to be sanctified (1974, 1–3).

placement of the entry adds to its meaning: it immediately follows the narration of how Guðmundr, in children's games, habitually assumed the role of a bishop. The author thereby links prefiguratively the character of Guðmundr's episcopate to that of Thomas à Becket, thus calling to mind the persecution both had suffered in their battle for the liberty of the church (cf. Karlsson 1973, 242; Würth 1994, 882–85).⁹ Similarly, he stresses the religiosity that was Þorgeirr's legacy to his kin.

The deaths of Einarr and of Ingimundr in desolate regions of Greenland introduce the theme of demonstrable saintliness by a well-known sign, the incorruptibility of their bodies (chaps. 1, 13; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1: 116, 138; cf. Angenendt 1991, 336–37; Deloos 1983, 210; Finucane 1982, 60). Of an adventurous cast of mind, Einarr—who, incidentally, was also childless—perished on a journey to Greenland's uninhabited wasteland. What struck contemporaries was the fact that his corpse, when found a year later, had suffered no decomposition. Likewise, they recalled Ingimundr's meritorious life and acknowledged his manifest holiness when, sixteen years after his death, Ingimundr's clothed body was discovered whole next to the skeletons of his six companions. By associating the incorruptibility of the two bodies, the author lends religious overtones also to Einarr's death, thus stressing the spirituality that, to a lesser and larger extent, characterized family members. Of greater importance was, however, the revelation that the foster father of the future saint had himself been proclaimed holy (Hagland 1996, 105).

While the family's religious disposition explains Guðmundr's devotion to the religious life, the personalities of leading male members left an imprint on the formation of Guðmundr's character, genetically and by example. Vivid accounts of significant episodes in the lives of two uncles and of his father stress their strength of character, outspokenness, and loyalty. Guðmundr's father—Ari the Strong—and Þorvarðr were noted for their skill and heroism as warriors. They distinguished themselves at the royal court as retainers, Þorvarðr to King Ingi (d. 1161) and Ari the Strong to the regent Erlingr (d. 1179). The few scenes devoted to the brothers highlight two characteristics. They both displayed intense loyalty and a propensity toward rashness or violence, traits later exhibited in Guðmundr. The saga introduces Þorvarðr by an act of heedless violence. He mortally injured a retainer of King Ingi. Nevertheless, by force of his personality, he gained the king's favor and admittance to the royal bodyguard. His loyalty survived King Ingi's fall, for he enjoined his brother to shun the pretender's party. Ari's loyalty to Erlingr, coupled with his passionate sense of honor, was equally intense. Already on board a ship to return to Iceland, he abruptly debarked when his enemies taunted him with abandoning the regent at a time of need. This was a fateful decision. Enabling

9. The comparison with Thomas à Becket occurs frequently in Arngrímur Brandsson's version of *Guðmundar saga (D)*, composed between 1343 and 1361 (Jónsson 1953, 155–56, 159–60, 215–16, 245, 251, 272, 334, 411; chaps. 4, 20, 27, 29, 36, 53, 71). There is only one instance of this comparison in *Guðmundar saga A* (Karlsson 1983, 98, chap. 60). For a discussion, see Ciklamini 1994, 232–33, 235–38.

the ambushed regent to escape, he lost his life by throwing himself unarmed as a shield between his lord and the assailants. Loyalty would likewise dominate Guðmundr's actions. In keeping with his calling, however, this was loyalty directed ultimately not toward men, but to a cause, the defense of the liberty of the church.

Signs at Guðmundr's birth and at play proclaimed his calling or prophesized his militancy. They also accord with the notion introduced in the twelfth century that, because of more stringent rules for accuracy, vitae were to stress the formative phases of childhood and adolescence (Goodich 1989, 31). The newborn's piercing scream prompted a noted seer to prognosticate that this infant would achieve greatness and inspire fear. Children's games dated in the early 1170s provided the second sign. At play with his cousin Qgmundr, Guðmundr would officiate with miter, staff, and gown at a make-believe church and altar, whereas Qgmundr, later known for his bravery and skill in combat, would wield the battle-axe, shield, and other weapons. Contemporaries felt amazement when the games turned into reality (chaps. 1, 4; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:118, 123; Kreutzer 1987, 67–71). Qgmundr himself was struck some thirty years later, in September 1201, by a larger coincidence. He recognized that these enactments were replays of a notable scene in the life of Saint Ambrose (chap. 24, p. 151). This coincidence, Qgmundr argued, was the patent sign that Guðmundr must submit to his election as bishop. The argument's intent was to override Guðmundr's misgivings that his strength was no match for the challenges he foresaw.

On one level, the portents associated with his childhood thus intimated his emotional force and predicted both the stature and calling that engaged his mind. On another, they mitigated and even exonerated the family's harshness toward the willful boy. Guðmundr's life as a boy and youth was difficult.¹⁰ His father's sudden death—Ari had lived with his wife in an irregular marriage—left Guðmundr without an inheritance. As compensation, the family entrusted the infant to Ingimundr, an uncle, to be trained as a cleric.¹¹ Consequently, Ingimundr exerted the strongest influence on Guðmundr, assuming the roles of both foster father and spiritual guide. His was not a simple task. Educating the boy proved to be arduous, for he was headstrong and suffered, as did his kin, from a streak of willful violence.¹² The author notes sarcastically that, in lieu of handing him his patrimony, Ingimundr dealt him beatings as an inducement to study his books. Ingimundr felt, rightly, that the will of the boy had to be broken (chap. 4; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:123). The outward circumstances of his life were equally onerous.

10. On the topic of childhood, see Goodich 1973–74; Shahar 1983.

11. Shahar cites several similar cases in which children were trained as ecclesiastics in order to deprive them of their patrimony (1990, 183–84).

12. See Karlsson 1977, 121–23, for a correction of an adjective to describe the boy. While earlier editions of the saga, including that in *Sturlunga saga*, cite *ólatr* 'willing' (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:123, line 5), the correct form is *ólátr* 'disorderly', which is the only adjective that makes sense in this context.

Every few years Ingimundr was on the move, sometimes with Guðmundr, sometimes without, as circumstances warranted. Despite the austere life, Guðmundr's affection for Ingimundr was so strong that he could not bear to be separated from his foster father for long.

Learned, disciplined, and unyielding, Ingimundr furthered Guðmundr's vocational and spiritual life and molded his character. He zealously oversaw Guðmundr's promotion within the church. At age two, the boy was confirmed by Bishop Björn Gilsson (1147–62). He was consecrated as an acolyte in 1173, as subdeacon in 1174, as deacon in 1175, and, at the canonical age of twenty-four, as priest by Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson (1163–1201). At that event, Ingimundr bestowed upon Guðmundr what he held dearest, a trove of precious books, as well as liturgical vestments (chaps. 3, 5, 11; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:121, 124, 133).¹³

Ingimundr also pressed Guðmundr to acquire the requisite skills for high office. A single scene, the consecration of a newly built church by Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson (1178–93), establishes that Guðmundr, in the manner of young men, required prodding. He preferred the company of clerks to participation in Mass. Ingimundr reproved him by ordering him to attend, for never would there be a better teacher or opportunity for him to acquire the skill to officiate. The author thus points out the predictive significance of Ingimundr's dismay. Guðmundr would be called upon not only to assume episcopal duties, but also to carry on Þorlákr's battle for the liberty of the church (chap. 7; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:130). Still, whereas Bishop Þorlákr would be canonized, the quest for Guðmundr's sanctity would prove to be arduous.

Several episodes present Ingimundr as a model of self-disciplined, principled conduct (chaps. 6, 12; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:125–29, 136–37). This was a behavior pattern later exhibited by Guðmundr. A dramatic scene on the stormy sea (chap. 6) illustrates Ingimundr's uncompromising attitude toward his duties as a priest.¹⁴ Badgered by his terrified shipmates to reveal the secret, most potent name of God, he refused to engage in what he considered mere and useless superstition (cf. Bolte 1903; Foote 1981). Although the boat was swamped, Guðmundr's foot was maimed, and Ingimundr lost his chest of books, the narrative vindicates Ingimundr's adamant stance. The highest name of God, remembered at long last by one passenger, was useless. Ultimately the ship was wrecked, with most of the goods lost, including all chests. Nevertheless, God's mercy was manifest, as all were rescued and also miraculously, some days later, Ingimundr's chest of books floated to land with one hasp of three securing its contents. From the retrospect of Guðmundr's episcopacy, Ingimundr's steadfast adherence to principle, even in face

13. On the dating, see notes by Stefán Karlsson (1983, 4). The dates given refer to years in office.

14. See also his behavior in Norway, when he preferred to suffer the loss of his personal goods, which had been exempted from confiscation, rather than divulge that the goods he pointed out as his own belonged to others (chap. 12).

of life-threatening peril, suggested a judgment both on the character he nurtured in Guðmundr and on the nature of Guðmundr's administration. Though censured and persecuted for stubbornly defending the privileges of the church, Guðmundr would be vindicated and his saintliness publicly confirmed by the grace of God.

Guðmundr's entry into the adult world was difficult. He had to overcome physical misfortune and the tug of worldly ambition and love. The maiming of his foot at sea (1180) was traumatic (Bragg 1994, 23–24). He had been unable to move, as his toes had been turned toward his heel. In the desperate situation at sea, a villain proposed tossing him overboard. That he survived was due to the magnanimity, care, and competence of his shipmates, who carried him to land despite fierce breakers. The setting and resetting of his foot required immense skill. The first time, the foot healed poorly with the bones jutting out. The second time, the most skillful practitioner in Iceland undertook the setting. The details given—two men, with a tong, strained to break the bone before it could be reset—allude to the excruciating pain he suffered (chap. 6; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:129–30). Yet in reviewing Guðmundr's life, this experience appeared to be a preordained test of character and will. His capacity to stand pain had been tested at sea and in the agony of the bone setting. His spiritual strength in surmounting anxiety and helplessness had been proven, when he rejoined Ingi-mundr with a healed but maimed foot in a country where travel was constant. His suffering prefigured his ability to bear the anguish and manhandling he would endure at the hands of his foes. A summary statement on the incident, given in a later chapter, articulates that this was the turning point in his life. From then on, and from year to year, Guðmundr's way of life turned more and more virtuous. His suffering had formed the bedrock for his virtues. Again the context points to the significance of the judgment. For one, the statement is embedded in a report on the blossoming of Guðmundr's reputation as a God-fearing, charitable, and caring priest (chap. 11, pp. 134–35; cf. Hertling 1933, 265–67). For another, a long account of the manifest signs of his sanctity follows, thus implicitly linking his seemingly excessive asceticism to his virtues, to the recognition of his saintliness, and to the miracles he wrought.

The conflict between secular ambition and religious dictates arose at once. A traditional avenue for advancement in Icelandic culture was knowledge of the law and successful prosecution of cases assumed. Also Guðmundr felt the pull of secular honor. He prosecuted a killing and outlawed the slayer. On his way to confiscate the goods of his outlaw, Guðmundr found, however, that his kinsman and supporter, Sturla Þórðarson, known also as Hvamm-Sturla, was at the point of death (1183). In the allusive manner of saga-telling, the sequence of narrative items reveals the wellspring of Guðmundr's inner turmoil. Immediately after Sturla's burial, Guðmundr admitted to himself that his support now had vanished, but not his ambition. He was rent by indecision, wavering between the wish to pursue the case, for the sake of his honor, and the fear of forfeiting his orders and clerkship.

At this dangerous crossroad, God inspired him. He vowed to donate to God any monies to be collected from this lawsuit, if only he could settle the case without risking his soul.

The sequel, without referring once to God, demonstrated God's hand in the resolution of the case. In a brawl they precipitated, Guðmundr's enemies wounded each other, killed one of their own and injured another, manifesting a wrongful conduct that appeared to be part of their character. The circumstances of the settlement would confirm this judgment on Guðmundr's enemies and also vindicate his suit. Bishop Brandr and his son Þorgeirr linked the two cases together, stipulating that they would settle the injury case only in tandem with Guðmundr's. Thus, without active participation, Guðmundr maintained his honor before both God and men (chaps. 8–9; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:131–33).

The loneliness Guðmundr was to experience and to transcend is recorded in chapter 11, the same chapter that begins with his ordination as priest. With Guðmundr's attainment of priestly office and of moral character, Ingimundr's obligations had ceased. Ingimundr departed for Norway as did Guðmundr's cousin Þorgeirr, "the two men he loved best," as the author notes in the sentence that follows the account of his ordination (chap. 11; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:133–34). Again the sequence of the narrative material points to the focus of the chapter, Guðmundr's loneliness as a precondition for his calling.

This loneliness intensified with the unexpected death of Þorgeirr (1186). Guðmundr experienced a conversion. He reacted to the loss of Þorgeirr so passionately that he seemed to have become another man. Only now did Guðmundr assume the hardships of a truly religious and ascetic life and devote himself to prayer, to the office of Mass, and to acts of charity. Such were the rigors of his life¹⁵ that some feared he had fallen prey to insanity and would not survive the severity of his new life and his disconsolateness.

That this was an erroneous perception is made clear. The wisest among men acknowledged the authenticity of Guðmundr's devout and committed life, confirming that, also in Iceland, the practice of asceticism was seen as akin to martyrdom (cf. Angenendt 1984, 459). Implicit in the attribution of miracles to Guðmundr was the notion that his ascetic life was the source of his power (cf. Angenendt 1994, 27). Miracles attended his consecration of wells and chants, inspiring the cognomen Guðmundr the Good. In effect, learned and popular opinions coalesced to confirm his manifest sanctity. For the learned, miracles proved sainthood, and for the populace, the saint performed miracles because of the power infused in him by God (Manselli 1975, 59).

The allegation that Guðmundr suffered a bout of insanity was the prelude to a report on the jealousy that grew in tandem with his reputation. People resented

15. Vauchez (1991b, 171–72) notes the emphasis placed by vitae of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries on the intensity of a saint's faith.

the fact that they received less acknowledgement for deeds they considered to be greater than Guðmundr's. They also begrudged his magnanimity to the poor. With his income he fed and clothed seven paupers as well as needy kinsmen.¹⁶ This they attempted to stop by having him transferred to less affluent parishes.¹⁷ They also persuaded Bishop Brandr to deprive him of his books and religious garb, claiming that the see was heir to Ingimundr's possessions (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:134–35).

This section also serves as an introduction to the fact that three years later signs, miracles, acts, and opinions proclaimed Guðmundr a saint (cf. Assion 1968; Bieler 1975, 13; Butsch 1985; Sveinsson 1936, 34–38, 42, 45–48). This was an important step in establishing Guðmundr's reputation for sainthood, as in the thirteenth century interest focused on miracles performed during a saint's life rather than those performed after death (Goodich 1982, 31). The significance of this period is evident in the number of chapters (chaps. 14–20), in an episodic structure that imitates that of the gospels, and in miracles that, according to custom, are modeled, even without explicit reference, on biblical prototypes (van Uytfanghe 1984, 474–76). Moreover, the description mirrors another European phenomenon, the engagement of pious, otherwise unknown, laymen in the acclamation and affirmation of Guðmundr's sanctity (Vauchez 1993). Interestingly, the famous miracle *Leiðsla Rannveigar* [Rannveig's otherworld vision], purportedly set in 1198,¹⁸ is not included, though it forms part of all four vitae. The vision, in which Rannveig is led through hell and heaven, is a personal as well as a transpersonal experience. While her physical punishments and views of the heavenly abodes of saints lead her to contrition and to a change of her wayward ways, her brief sojourn in heaven was important particularly to the vitae. Among the saintly palaces she saw was one that still stood empty, predestined for Guðmundr's entry, several decades later, into the world divine.

Chapter 14 initiates the series of miracles with testimony from two named and honorable witnesses that the Holy Ghost was in him and with him. One witness, a wise and rational woman, attested that while Guðmundr blessed the congregation with "Dominus vobiscum," fire emanated from his mouth and wafted skyward. A farmer, observing Guðmundr at prayer in church, saw a bird flying from Guðmundr's shoulder into the air. This presence of the Holy Ghost validates

16. Mollat (1986, 57–58) points out that the social and spiritual issues on poverty surfaced around 1200, i.e., shortly before the election of Guðmundr to the episcopacy, but had been apparent a hundred years earlier. Toward the end of his office, several theologians and canonists had written on the rights of the poor. Guðmundr's concern for the poor is thus also viewed as commendable from within the European Christian community (cf. Little 1975, 16). McGuire (1983, 206) comments on the commonplace that, in Cistercian accounts, bishops and abbots are praised for their acts of charity.

17. Vésteinsson (2000, 81) attributes Guðmundr's move to seven parishes within the course of seventeen years to a lack of qualified priests, even in the vicinity of Hólar.

18. See Larrington 1995. The vision is probably modeled on the *Visio Tnugdali* that was translated into Icelandic around 1300 as *Duggals leiðsla* (Cahill 1983).

the account of miracles that follows. He healed the sick and lame, sanctified and sweetened wells and springs (Lárusson 1942, 117–28), becalmed the sea long enough for two youngsters to sail their boat home, caused a swollen and destructive river to recede, and, by officiating as the episcopal deputy at the translation of Saint Jón, tempered the harshness of an exceptionally bitter winter. He had a whale stranded to allow his host to feed him and his large retinue, liberated a man from the assaults of a trollwoman, and induced a woman to abandon a long-lived and prohibited concubinage. The types of miracles attributed to Guðmundr thus included also a spiritual miracle defined as one that inspires a sinner to foreswear the indulgence of a vice (Demm 1975, 310).

Of equal interest is his assumption of a mission assumed by thirteenth-century saints: the battle against heresy. Heresy connoted also blasphemy and opposition to a saint. In the instances recounted, one is termed a miracle and an exemplification of Guðmundr's charity (chap. 22; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:148), the other two are presented as successful legal actions (chaps. 15, 16, pp. 139, 141—dated 1192, 1196), their very success signaling the saint's power (cf. Goodich 1988). The miracle revolves around a priest's doubts about the authenticity of Saint Jón's relics and even about his sanctity. Guðmundr, who had donated the relics to his friend Sigurðr Ormsson, called upon Jón to confirm his sainthood to those present and to convert the priest's disbelief. As everyone kissed the bones, all but the priest perceived the fragrance of incense (cf. Dinzelbacher 1990, 136). Then Guðmundr requested that they all pray that Jón forgive the priest for his words. When the priest touched the relic, he also recognized the sweetness. The significance of Guðmundr's intercession is stressed by the communal thanksgiving, the ringing of all church bells, and the singing of the *Te Deum*.

The sheer number and variety of miracles and signs of holiness establish his sainthood before his nomination as bishop to the northern see. They have, however, also a less obvious function: typecasting the opposition as men so blinded by self-interest and by arrogance that they denied Guðmundr's saintly nature once he had assumed his episcopal office. The power he would wield as bishop made them oblivious to the mission God had entrusted to him. In effect, the miracles, laced both with statements on the jealousy he had aroused and with prefigurative references to the rise of enmity, represent an apologia for, and exoneration of, his tumultuous future.

This sanctity manifested itself also in a modified attitude toward lawsuits. He now participated only in suits that affected the religious sphere. In one (chap. 15), he and other respected men persuaded Bishop Þorlákr to dismiss a case of complicity in murder against a cousin. In another (chap. 16), he prosecuted a chieftain on two counts: the first for calumny, for he had charged Guðmundr with purloining the money vowed to the saints; the second for blasphemy in alleging that the relics Guðmundr allowed his congregation to kiss were mere horse bones. The lawsuits demonstrated that Guðmundr's education was complete. He had enjoyed expert

training and had gained expertise in sacramental and jurisdictional matters that would fall within episcopal purview (cf. Benson 1971, 55).

The chapters stress likewise that Guðmundr's reputation for sanctity rested on consensus. Not only the poor venerated him, but also chieftains from the north and south acknowledged his authority. The country's church hierarchy confirmed his accomplishments and claim to holiness. Upon his congregation's petition, Bishop Brandr denied his request to change his parish. This, the bishop exclaimed in wonder, was a case of Pope Gregory redux (chap. 16; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:141). At the translation of Bishop Þórlákr of Skálholt in southern Iceland (1198), Guðmundr, a northerner, assumed a major role, wiping the coffin jointly with the two bishops and selecting the chants at the translation ceremony (chap. 17, p. 142; cf. Klauser 1954, 86, 89, 91). As Bishop Brandr's deputy, he officiated at the translation of Bishop Jón Ögmundarson in 1200, a time of famine and harsh weather. The many miracles at the translation confirmed Jón's sanctity as did the change of weather shortly thereafter (chap. 18, pp. 142–43). For Guðmundr's reputation, his participation in the sanctification of the two Icelandic saints meant that he was a worthy successor, not only regionally, but also nationally. Supporting this interpretation is a remnant of a purificator believed to have been in Guðmundr's possession. Of Anglican workmanship and therefore commissioned, the purificator bears the image of Guðmundr's predecessors in sainthood (Guðjónsson 1989, 62–63; Eldjárn 1950, 50).

His participation in Bishop Þórlákr's translation was the first instance that he was publicly honored in the south (cf. Sveinsson 1936, 24–25). The second preceded his nomination to the see in the north in 1201. His reception demonstrated the broad and unequivocal support he enjoyed. At the conclusion of the Althing, many chieftains from the south invited him. When a holy nun died the night he stayed at Skálholt, Bishop Páll conferred upon him a signal honor. Guðmundr was to chant the burial mass while Bishop Páll and Gizurr Hallson, a descendant of Iceland's first bishop, presided. As Gizurr himself testified, the chanting was so extraordinary that its very performance signaled the nun's sanctity (chap. 20; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:146). Implicit was the notion that Guðmundr was the voice chosen by God to affirm the nun's holy life. The most noteworthy honor accorded to him was, however, the procession led by Abbot Karl of Þingeyrar and the well-known monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson when Guðmundr visited the monastery on All Saints' Day in 1199. They chanted a response that honored him as a saint in the full grace of God (chap. 19, p. 145). That year, the chieftain Kolbeinn Tumason, his patron-to-be and later chief foe, deemed Guðmundr, his parish priest, to be truly a saint (chap. 18, p. 142). That the deference shown him was to be interpreted as divine confirmation of his stature and, prefiguratively, as a sign of his subsequent, God-willed election as bishop, is intimated by a pessimistic note. The author notes ominously that Guðmundr's recorded deeds elicited men's esteem until arrogance blinded them (p. 145).

The account of his nomination and election as bishop manifests that all proper procedures were followed. He had been trained in the “sacramental, jurisdictional, and magisterial duties of an episcopal ordinary” (Benson 1971, 55). Although electoral procedure in the Middle Ages, i.e., electoral rights and sequence of acts, followed customary law, Guðmundr’s election also adhered to the following canonical prescriptions: the clergy, not only chieftains, had a role in the election; Guðmundr’s combishop consented to his nomination; and Guðmundr sought archiepiscopal confirmation.

More important, however, were hagiographic features interwoven into the historical account. What is stressed is Guðmundr’s humility, his unwillingness to assume the office to which he was elected, his repeated offer to cede the office to another, and the continuous flow of miracles. The prelude to the nomination is a prophecy by a supporter of Guðmundr, later an avowed enemy. He predicted that Guðmundr would occupy a higher office because of his stature. That very day, unbeknownst to both, Bishop Brandr had died and Guðmundr had been elected his successor (chap. 21; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:147; cf. Lárusson 1956; Ganzer 1971; Ganzer 1972, 166–69, 194, 197). That this prediction was voiced by an enemy-to-be continues the recurrent theme: Guðmundr’s supporters and patrons would be blinded by arrogance in opposing his policies and actions.

The news of Brandr’s death and his election to the episcopacy filled Guðmundr with humility and a deep sense of unworthiness. He recounted that he was dazed, as if struck by a stone. He could neither eat nor sleep. Even after a visionary dream in which an altar fell into his arms, he lost his speech when the letters of his nomination reached him (chap. 23; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:149–50). Perhaps the sense of unworthiness that beset him—he felt impotent to quell the rise of the virulent opposition he foresaw—was solely fear of the Lord. The emphasis on his humility, however, counterbalances effectively the coming perception that Guðmundr’s conduct in office—a headstrong stance and unvarnished speech toward his patron—emanated from righteousness tainted by arrogance.

Guðmundr’s repeated refusal to accept the honor reveals his sense of insufficiency and the realization of the fierce enmity he would face. Equally strong is the consensus that he had no choice but to accept. A hermit nun announced to him her vision that Mary, patroness of the see of Hólar, wished him to accept the office. His own kinsmen were bewildered at his reluctance and pressured him to agree to the election. His cousin Qgmundr reminded him of the prophetic nature of their childhood games. His uncle Þorvarðr ordered him to assume the office (Vésteinsson 2000, 205) and, thereby, also the role of head of the family. He likewise recounted two dreams which manifested that Guðmundr’s assumption of the office was ordained. In the first, Þorvarðr entered Christ’s church in Trondheim, but as soon as he reached the door, his shoulders prevented him from entering. In

the second, he saw Saint Olaf, Norway's eternal king, welcoming Guðmundr to his seat. Even Kolbeinn, who claimed he had been neutral in the election, pressed him to accede to the wish of the people and to an election conducted according to the laws of the land (chaps. 24–25, 27; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1: 150–52, 155).

Prestssaga repeatedly refers to the legality of Guðmundr's election. Implicit in the description is, however, the notion that the process was canonical. His election by clerics and laymen conformed to practices in western Europe despite the decretists' emphasis that a bishop was to be elected by the cathedral chapter only. Also, according to contemporary canonical practice, Guðmundr petitioned his provincial bishop to assent to his election. His confirmation journey was customary, for the canons of the cathedral church in Trondheim had the electoral right to confirm or not confirm (cf. Benson 1968, 1971). Þorvardr's dream that Saint Olaf, royal patron of the archdiocese, welcomed Guðmundr obviously was a sign, not only to the bishop-elect but also to those empowered to confirm Guðmundr's election, that his election was sanctioned by God. Therefore, his future role as advocate of the liberty of the church was preordained.

Once Guðmundr accepted the nomination, the strife that would mark his incumbency arose. Guðmundr was a cleric of the new order, unwilling to play a subservient role to chieftains used to exerting pressure on the indigenous church and on its officeholders. Like Ingimundr, he was outspoken and unwilling to engage in appeasement or compromise. A realist, he understood the consequences of his attitude and the suffering he and his administration would face, as an embarrassing but symbolic incident would illustrate.

At the celebration following his formal acceptance, a breach of etiquette—Guðmundr's table was covered by a tattered tablecloth—occasioned an apology from his host Kolbeinn. Guðmundr dismissed Kolbeinn's expression of regret. The tattered tablecloth, Guðmundr averred, reflected the state-to-be of his office. The accuracy of his prediction was apparent from the first. Kolbeinn installed himself with six men at the see, dismissed the secretary and friend of Guðmundr in favor of a well-regarded but jealous cleric, Kygri-Björn. Simultaneously, Kolbeinn curtailed Guðmundr's charity toward the poor. While Guðmundr had ordered that the poor be served two meals a day, Kolbeinn had the number of meals cut to one.

Again a miracle delivers the verdict on Guðmundr's charity to the poor (chap. 26; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:153–54; cf. Karlsson 1984).¹⁹ Despite the generous distribution of food, the estate's administrator experienced none of the scarcity that the see ordinarily suffered just before Christmas. Guðmundr's assessment was that, by this miracle, Mary had publicly sanctioned his, rather than Kolbeinn's, position on the feeding of the poor. Clearly Guðmundr

19. In a fragment (Lárusson 1951, 203–6), Guðmundr's day of death is commemorated by remembrance of his charity that includes a long anecdote retold as a miracle.

followed the evangelical mode of life that mandated “disdain for all materialistic values” (Little 1975, 16; cf. also Óskarsdóttir 1992). He saw the see’s wealth not as a foundation, or even a symbol, of its power, but solely as a means to alleviate the suffering of the poor.

The miracle, the bestowal of ample food at the time of seasonal need, also acted as a warning to Sigurður Ormsson and others like-minded who begrudged or questioned Guðmundr’s prodigality. Sigurður had moved to the see to administer its finances, but grew alarmed at Guðmundr’s charity. Before Guðmundr left for his confirmation in Norway, Sigurður insisted on a guarantee of his own wealth and total liberty in overseeing the see’s finances. Guðmundr himself raised the contentious issue of his liberality in a letter to his fellow bishop in the south, Páll Jónsson. While requesting Páll’s consent to his election or the nomination of a more suitable candidate, Guðmundr noted his appointment of Sigurður to allay complaints against his financial management. By Guðmundr’s own words, the saga gives credence to the criticism that he violated his obligation as trustee of his patrimony (chap. 28; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:155–56; cf. Sot 1981, 55). The justified dismay of Sigurður, a friend and expert in financial practices, acts as a counterpoise to Kolbeinn’s uncharitable attitude and measures. The miracle, however, adjudicates the debate. Mary has spoken for Guðmundr, even if his critics have failed to hear her message.

Scholars have pondered the question of why the saga appears to end in medias res, after the successful, if hazardous, confirmation journey to Norway (chap. 29; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:158–59). In its highly allusive style, the saga ends appropriately enough. The journey is simply the beginning of a life that is predictive: Guðmundr’s episcopacy will bear the imprint of a man steeled by adversity.²⁰ Distinguished by his learning and known for the force of his convictions, he will act as Ambrose did as bishop of Milan: fearless and unflagging in the defense of the church, combating the claims, pretensions, and transgressions of powerful foes.

The *Prestssaga*, as recorded in *Sturlunga saga*, is hence no conventional hagiographic work (cf. Smalley 1974, 48–49; Southern 1963, 320–36). With its annalistic structure, its author squarely set his account within a cosmopolitan framework, indicating that the life of Bishop Guðmundr as priest had an intrinsic interest that transcended Iceland’s boundaries. Besides demonstrating the inheritance of character traits and of spiritual leanings, the genealogical matter also aided in creating a wider geographic setting. His kinsmen participated in ventures and exploits that placed them in the midst of Norwegian political and military affairs. In their pursuit of trade, they ventured as far as Greenland. Others, though deeply involved in secular matters, were men of abiding faith. His uncle Ingimundr, a learned

20. Sayers (1993) perceives the spiritual and intellectual context in the possible identification of Hirtir, the locus of a landfall on the voyage, with an Irish penitential island.

and prominent clergyman of uncompromising conviction, shared the adventuresomeness and fearlessness of his secular brothers. Viewed today as distracting digressions, the genealogical and annalistic matter nevertheless provides depth to the narrative. Casting light on Guðmundr's character and life as well as on his significance as saint, this information is an essential element of the "intellectual honesty" that Ward observes in several lives of the twelfth century (1982, 171).

Providing a historical context and genealogical information on protagonists was a standard feature of Old Norse literature. The author of *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, however, used it to its fullest extent, interspersing accounts of kinsmen throughout the narrative. More important, his work was not that of an unabashed booster of Guðmundr's sanctity, although he surely championed his cause. He wrote from retrospect, with a clear view of, and understanding for, Guðmundr's well-known and bitterly criticized character flaws. He countered this criticism methodically. By inspiring empathy for Guðmundr's passion, zeal, and honesty, he fostered an appreciation of Guðmundr's spiritual and temporal mission. His failings in the eyes of contemporaries were his strengths. These enabled him to stand his ground, as Ambrose did, in the periodic struggle of secular power against the legitimate authority of the church.²¹ Thus, in the typological thought pattern of the times, Guðmundr stood as a pillar of the church. He was as worthy a successor to Ambrose as had been his Icelandic predecessor in the battle, Saint Þorlákr (1133–93). One significant fact in the spiritual succession of Saint Þorlákr and Guðmundr, a saint in the making, was the celebration of Saint Ambrose's feast days. It had been Þorlákr who, in Guðmundr's lifetime, supported passage of the law that mandated the observance of December 7 as a holy day of obligation in Iceland. During this contest between secular power and the authority of the church, Saint Ambrose's feast day served both as the liturgical reminder of Ambrose's importance to their battle and as validation of their joint and saintly struggle (*Þorláks saga* chaps. 15, 30; Helgason 1938–78, 2:213, 271).

While all vitae recall Ambrose's centrality for Guðmundr's mission, it is noteworthy that Ambrose's feast day was removed from the holy days of obligation once the principle of church authority in matters of ecclesiastical jurisdiction had been asserted. Equally noteworthy is the fact that the cult of Ambrose failed to take root in Iceland. A single church is dedicated to Ambrose, at a farm where Guðmundr officiated as priest (Cormack 1994, 19, 22, 76–77). Thus, Ambrose's life derived its meaning mainly from the battle for the liberty of the church by Þorlákr and, most fervently, by Guðmundr, his spiritual son.

21. Sot (1981, 56) points out that one of the main functions in recording the life of a bishop was his position in *res publica* and his relationship to the secular world. Thus the *Prestssaga*, in its last section, foreshadows appropriately the problems that will beset his episcopacy. See also Southern 1970.

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