The characteristic feature of Guðmundr Arason’s vitae on which modern research centres is the period of his episcopacy and the arguments with chieftains. However, it should be borne in mind that the saint, as the narratives claim, also worked a lot of miracles for many noble laymen and was proclaimed a holy man by them. A closer look at the events proves that Guðmundr’s relationships with the powerful laymen were not as uniformly negative as is often assumed. Many of them provided him with support at the beginning of his clerical career and remained in the same position when others entered into a conflict with the saint during the years of his episcopacy. Also quite a few of those who opposed Guðmundr for various reasons had initially had a positive relationship with him. Altogether the analysis of those alliances puts them in a rather complex perspective showing how much depended on family ties, social position, and the political situation in a particular period of time.

5.1. Kolbeinn Tumason was a skáld and a chieftain (goðordsmaðr) at Víðimýri (in the vicinity of Hólar).1 Although married to Guðmundr’s cousin, he does not seem to have been involved in the saint’s life at first. Guðmundr’s first brief visit to Víðimýri took place in spring 1199, and in winter 1199/1200 he stayed with the chieftain who showed him “much respect and affection”.2 Moreover, Kolbeinn declared Guðmundr “a truly saintly man” and maintained that he had a proof of this, meaning, among others, the miracles performed by the saint.3 A year later, as the narratives underline, Guðmundr was “at home at Víðimýri” where he enjoyed great esteem and favour.4

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1 Genealogy 34.
2 GP, ch. 18; GA, ch. 70; GB, ch. 59.
3 “[...] kallaði hann at sönnu sannhelgan mann”, GP, ch. 18; GA, ch. 70; GB, ch. 48.
4 GP, ch. 19; GA, ch. 79; GB, ch. 52.
The situation began to change immediately after the death of Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson. On 14 September 1201, while Guðmundr was staying at Krossavík in Vopnafjörður, the messengers from Kolbeinn Tumason arrived there and Einarr forkfr delivered the news to him: “Kolbeinn and all the men of the district have elected you as their bishop”. Little about the process of episcopal election in Iceland at the time can be said with certainty. The sources usually mention election of bishops before they were sent for consecration, but details concerning, for instance, its agreement with the requirements of canon law are unknown. According to narratives and documentary evidence, the process consisted of a public discussion about the candidates and the reigning bishop seems to have had the last word. However, it is difficult to state whether his opinion was decisive or whether it was a mere confirmation of a decision taken by a gathering where chieftains probably had the most influence. The latter seems to have been relevant in the northern diocese where all the bishops (apart from Jón Ógmundarson) were chosen by the northerners, and where all the bishops down to Guðmundr Arason were of chiefly rank. They were members of different families, which suggests that none of them was predominant in the area of Skagafjörður. Moreover, another pattern can be observed: all those chiefly families who were represented by the different bishops were influential but would not use their control of the diocese as a primary tool of dominance. The bishops turned out to be rather submissive and the same was expected from Guðmundr Arason.

About a month later (mid-October 1201) Kolbeinn met Guðmundr and told him about a meeting held at Vellir on the Feast of St. Egidius (1 September). The chieftain made it clear that he would have accepted the election of Guðmundr and that of Magnús Gizurarson (1216–1237) who had much stronger support as well as more experience. Magnús was one of the sons of Chieftain and Lawspeaker Gizurr Hállsson, and could be called a second chieftain to his older brother Hallr, who was also a priest, and later a lawspeaker. The fact that Guðmundr and not

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5 “Þú ert kosinn til biskups af Kolbeini ok öllum heraðsmönnum” (GP, ch. 23). GA, ch. 96 (adds “ok abotum”), GB, ch. 68 (fragmentary—the sentence is missing after af).
7 For a detailed discussion see Orri Vésteinsson, The Christianization of Iceland 2000, pp. 157–60.