CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DEATH OF THE SAINT AND HIS POSTHUMOUS FAME

As mentioned in the ‘Introduction’, it has been generally assumed that Guðmundr, although never canonized, enjoyed popularity among the Icelanders. Stefán Karlsson has suggested that he was considered a popular saint but the Church was against Guðmundr’s cult.¹ The image of that popularity, certainly directly after his death, or even pre-mortem, seems to be based mainly on the evidence from the sagas. How this popularity can be measured, and why the Church would object to the veneration, are the two vital questions in this context as well as which particular authority within the Church objected to the cult. This chapter examines the official beginning of the saint’s veneration: the process of translation and other events which put his relics in focus.

The monasteries of Þingeyrar and Munkaþverá arguably played a decisive role in creating the *fama sanctitatis* and the cult of Guðmundr. The bishops whose names are connected with the fate of the saint’s bones acted largely under the influence of the local clerical circles in order to reach a consensus after numerous conflicts. The issue of Guðmundr’s popularity is complex: as the most recently deceased saint he must have been well remembered. His life has been portrayed in six sagas, four of which were composed after the translation in 1315. Thus there is no doubt that the learned influential circles aimed at spreading Guðmundr’s saintly reputation. The questions that need to be answered are whether it is reflected elsewhere and how the beginning of the official veneration is recorded. The time span under consideration is 1315–1403, although the interpretation of the document dated to 1403 is debatable. Can the first official vow made by the inhabitants of Eyjafjörður at Möðruvellir indeed be considered a spontaneous initiative, or another act performed under the influence of the monks? What can be said about the aim and the reasons of the clerical initiative to spread Guðmundr’s veneration?

¹ Stefán Karlsson, ‘Guðmundar sögur biskups’, pp. 153 and 157. Few specific arguments to support this view, however, are presented in this publication.
8.1. Pre-mortem prophecies

André Vauchez has claimed that some fourteenth-century canonization processes reveal the change of attitude towards the saints. The records suggest that there were witnesses who visited a saint not to ask for a cure, but to verify and, if possible, experience personally the reality of the miraculous gifts attributed to them. The chief of these was spiritual clairvoyance. Another was the prophetic charisma, which was a direct extension of it. Vauchez writes, “the prodigies expected of the saints were therapeutic and apotropaic. In the popular mind, holy men and women were beginning to be seen also as clairvoyants who shared the divine privilege of omniscience”.2 Visions, revelations and prophecies acquired great importance with the rise of mystical sanctity. The examples from the narratives concerning Guðmundr Arason’s episcopacy clearly reveal that not only “the popular mind”, but also educated clerics and chieftains appreciated the saints’ gift of clairvoyance. The Icelandic sagas are rich in prophetic remarks and leave the readers with the impression that all types of individuals were able to predict the events to come. It is not surprising to find a passage in Lárentíus saga telling about how the bishop dreamt of holding St. Lawrence’s relics shortly before his death.3 The recording of such abilities, especially if the number of prophetic messages was large, proved the saintliness of the bishops and might have led to the beginning of a canonization process. The authors of the fourteenth-century variants of Guðmundr’s vita certainly had that in mind.

Guðmundr’s prophetic skills increased in the period of his episcopacy. Different kinds of prophetic messages have been recorded in the sources. There are a few more incidents that reveal the bishop’s extraordinary ability of seeing things that occurred at various places when he was not present (such as the drowning of a group of people in Norway), a feature he shares with such renowned saints as Ambrose4 and Benedict.5 GItb and GB also mention some prophetic statements about the events to come concerning the career or family

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2 Vauchez gives here rather drastic examples of prophesizing collective catastrophes, which was as common in the Nordic countries (Bridget, Dorothy of Montau and Nicholas of Linköping) as in Italy from the second half of the fourteenth century (Vauchez, Sainthood in the later Middle Ages, p. 525).
3 Lárentíus saga A ch. 57 and B ch. 66.
4 Ambrosius saga biskups, ch. 26.
5 Benedictus saga, ch. 20.