The Education of Sturla Þórðarson (and the Icelandic Elite)

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The Icelandic social elite in the thirteenth century was one of the best-educated classes in Europe. They were well versed in law – secular law, Canon law and Icelandic church law – geography, history, Old Norse mythology and skaldic poetry, and skilled in saga writing and rhetoric. Sturla Þórðarson (1214–1284) was a godi (‘chieftain’), lögsögumaðr (‘lawspeaker’ [1251]), lögmaðr (‘lawman’ [1272–1282]), and besides being a skald, he wrote sagas and was a great storyteller. Yet even though we have quite reliable information about Sturla in his adult life, and dependable data about Icelandic history in the thirteenth century in general, nothing is known about Sturla’s education – or, for that matter, that of the other chieftains. How do we then approach this problem? In the following essay I will start by looking at the farms that chieftains in Iceland made their residences, and where we can assume their sons received most of their education. I will also investigate how many of the chieftains were educated as priests. Subsequently, I will look at an important aspect of the power game, the use of law. My assumption here is that there must have been ties between the education of the social elite and the field on which it would one day play a part, namely in the arena of law and legal manoeuvring. Finally I will consider the relations between skalds, saga writers and the political development in the last decades of the Free State period (c. 930–1262/64). This paper will focus especially on the years 1210–1260.

Chieftains and Major Churches

In the Middle Ages there were two types of churches (alkirkjur) in Iceland: staðir and bændakirkjur. If a church owned the entire farm on which it was founded, it was called a staðr, or local ecclesiastical institution; if it owned less it was labelled a bændakirkja, or ‘farmer’s church’. The staðir were usually wealthier than the bændakirkjur.¹ Of Iceland’s some 330 churches, roughly 110

¹ Magnús Stefánsson, ‘Kirkjuvald eflist’: 72–81; Magnús Stefánsson, ‘Frá goðakirkju til biskupskirkju’: 210–26; Magnús Stefánsson, ‘Islandsk egenkirkevesen’: 234–54; Magnús Stefánsson,
were stæðir and approximately 220 were bændakirkjur. Of these 330 churches,\(^2\) about thirty-three can be labelled as major churches, all established in the twelfth century, twenty-two in Skálholt See and eleven in Hólar See. What these churches had in common was that they were usually founded by chief-
tains who used them as their residence; they were also the country’s wealthiest
churches, and the vast majority were stæðir.\(^3\) Additionally they had three or
more clerics, and these were the best-educated clerics in the country. A good
example is Styrmir Kárason fródi (‘the learned’, d. 1245). He was a priest at Reyk-
holt from 1228 to 1235 and ‘wrote’ a version of Landnámabók, a Life of St Olaf,
a redaction of Sverris saga and possibly Harðar saga ok Hólmerja.\(^4\) Thus, the
chieftains had amongst the members of their household a number of clerics
who were well equipped to teach their sons. It is also likely that the chieftains
themselves participated in the education of their sons.

In a well-known passage from Kristni saga (c. 1240) it is specified that when
Gizurr Ísleifsson was Bishop of Skálholt in 1082–1118:

> [Most] honourable men in the country were educated and ordained
priests, even though they were chieftains, such as Hallr Teitsson in Hau-
kadalur and Sæmundr the Learned, Magnús Þórðarson in Reykholt, Si-
mon Jörundarson in Bæ, Guðmundr son of Brandr in Hjarðarholt, Ari
the Learned, Ingimundr Einarrsson at Hólar, Ketill Porsteinsson at Móðru-
vellir in the north, and Ketill Guðmundarson, the priest Jón Þorvarðarson
and many others, though their names are not written down [here].\(^5\)

Of these ten honourable men, seven were chieftains. In a register of the most
powerful priests dating from around 1143, it is immediately obvious that in
the twelfth century chieftains were not only educated but also ordained as
priests.\(^6\) Of the forty priests mentioned, some thirteen were chieftains. During

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\(^1\) Staðir og staðamál: studier i islandske egenkirkelige og beneficierettslige forhold i middelal-
\(^3\) Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Høvdingene, storkirkene og den litterære aktiviteten på Island fram til
c. 1300’: 190–94.
\(^4\) Flateyjarbók, 2: xii; 3: ix; Páll Eggert Ólason, Æslenskar æviskrár frá landnámstímum til ársloka
1940, 4: 359; Harðar saga: xliv–xlvi.
\(^5\) Biskupa sögur 1: cliv, 42–43: ‘virðingamenn lærdir ok vigðir og lærdir til presta þó at höfðingjar
væri, svá sem Hallr Teitsson í Haukadal ok Sæmundr inn fróði, Magnús Þórðarson í Reykja-
holti, Simon Jörundarson í Bæi, Guðmundr son Brandy í Hjarðarholti, Ari inn fróði, Ingim-
mundr Einarrsson á Hólar, ok Ketill Porsteinsson á Móðruvellum [in Eyjafjörður], ok Ketill
Guðmundarson, Jón prestr Þorvarðarson ok margir aðrir þó at eigi sé ritaðir.’
\(^6\) Diplomatarium Islandicum 1: no. 29.