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WAS ICELAND THE GALAPAGOS OF GERMANIC POLITICAL CULTURE?

I

BEHIND the presumptuous title of my talk is an attempt to deal with the question of whether the political system of medieval Iceland, before its submission to the Norwegian kingdom in the 13th century, should be considered as being of its own special kind, rather than just a variant of a medieval European political system. First of all, though, I should draw attention to three limitations. Firstly, I work on the assumption that there once existed something which could be called *a* Germanic political culture although our knowledge about what it was really like is of course very limited. I will only go as far as searching for traces of such a culture in early Iceland. Secondly, I must inevitably work with a drastically simplified model of *the* medieval European political system. I am aware that there were immense local variations in European politics in the middle ages, and Iceland was far from being the only society practically without royal power. I am not going to treat it as unique in a strict sense, but as anomalous to the most usual and best-known model. For obvious reasons I shall particularly view Iceland in comparison with Norway, and within Norway, particularly with the law district of Gulapingslög. My third reservation is that the comparison in the title of my paper between Iceland and the Galapagos is of course an exaggeration. Whether or not any considerable amount of exclusively Germanic political culture existed in Iceland, obviously, I do not argue that it lived there in a perfect isolation as the tortoises or lizards of the famous archipelago do.

II

Running the risk of being too basic and stating the obvious, I will begin by describing explicitly the political system of Iceland which is the subject of my discussion.

First and foremost I am thinking about the formal ruling system as it is set out in the law-code *Grágás*, described in Ari's *Book of the Icelanders* and referred to in the sagas. At the bottom of this system were the local chieftains, *goðar*, somewhere around 40 in number, all roughly and formally equal in power. The term *goði* seems to derive from *goð/guð*: "god", and in the sagas one can see that their authors took it for granted that the *goðar* served as priests of some kind in pagan times. All farmers' households belonged to the domain of a *goði*, a *goðorð* as it was called, but were legally free to change allegiance from one *goði* to another. The *goðar* in turn were free to expel farmers from their *goðorð*. The *goðar* were supposed to hold a spring assembly each year, three *goðar* together. Then there was the central *alþing*, the general assembly at Þingvellir, where the *goðar* sat in the *lögrétta* or law council, decreed what was the right law on specific issues, and passed new laws. Furthermore, at the *alþing* there were five separate courts of justice, nominated by the *goðar*: Four were quarter courts, *fjórðungs-dómar*, each of them dealing with cases from one of the quarters of the country, and the fifth court, the *fimmtardómr*, was a kind of appeal court which dealt with cases that had not been settled in a satisfactory way in the quarter courts.

Alongside this system of formal courts there was a complicated informal system for settling disputes by arbitration and reconciliation. Space here does not allow me to take this into consideration; I must concentrate on the formal system of government, and even within that I can only deal with a few important points.

Many scholars have had their doubts about the real existence and functionality of this system. But I would like to state categorically that I do not see any strong reason to doubt that it existed and worked roughly in the way it is described in the law-code. The lawbook *Grágás* is not a single piece of text: it is a huge collection of legal provisions which have been organized in different ways in different books. It is difficult to imagine that this collection could have emerged in any other way than in the form of actual law.¹ In many cases, episodes related in the sagas confirm the evidence of the law. In some cases, the sagas seem to contradict individual prescriptions of laws, and some scholars have made much of such cases,

¹ Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning. Staða og áhrif goðordsmanna í þjóðveldi Íslendinga* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 2004), 28–59.

but during my study of the ruling system which is published in my book *Goðamenning*, I became convinced that in all major points, the saga literature supports the evidence of the law. The question that then arises is how this system originated.

III

For a long time, the colonization of Iceland was seen as a deliberate quest for freedom from the oppression of royal power in Norway. It is easy to read this interpretation from the Icelandic sagas. The *Book of Settlements* recounts that some 30 original settlers in Iceland, i.e., around 7% of the total number of all settlers, fled to Iceland to escape the oppression of King Harald Fairhair, or left the country after some kind of conflict with him. Only four settlers are said to have emigrated to Iceland after consultation with the king.² This indicates strongly that in the 13th century, when the extant versions of the *Book of Settlements* were written, it was a well-known theory that the unification of royal power in Norway in the 9th century, attributed to King Harald, was an important cause of the colonization of Iceland. This text was written at the time when the king of Norway was attempting to gain control of Iceland, and his ambitions no doubt met some resistance in Iceland although we cannot discern any clear pro- or anti-royalist parties among the Icelandic elite. It seems at least possible, perhaps likely, that the stories of settlers fleeing the oppression of King Harald were intended to comment in some way on the undesirability of belonging to a kingdom.

The theory of King Harald's oppression is expressed even more clearly in *Egil's saga*:

In each province King Harald took over all the estates and all the land, habited or uninhabited, and even the sea and lakes. All the farmers were made his tenants, and everyone who worked the forests and dried salt, or hunted on land or at sea, was made to pay tribute to him.

Many people fled the country to escape this tyranny and settled various uninhabited parts of many places, to the east in Jamtland

² Gunnar Karlsson, *Drög að fræðilegri námsbók í íslenskri miðaldasögu I. Landnám, stjórnkerfi og trú* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 1997), 55.

and Halsingland, and to the west in the Hebrides, the shire of Dublin, Ireland, Normandy in France, Caithness in Scotland, the Orkney Isles and Shetland Isles, and the Faroe Islands. And at this time, Iceland was discovered.³

This evidence can easily be read in such a way that Iceland was chosen as an abode of freedom at a time when oppressive royal power was gaining strength in the Nordic world. A trace of such a reading can also be found in the first published history of Iceland, Arngrímur Jónsson's *Crymogæa*, printed in 1609. According to this account many settlers of Iceland went there in order to seek freedom.⁴ This statement contains two elements which are of major importance here. One is that the emigration took place for a deliberate political purpose; the other that this purpose was freedom.

After the emergence of liberal, democratic ideas in Europe and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries, the understanding of these elements developed and they acquired an increased and partly new significance. It came to be considered normal, which had been extremely rare earlier, for new ruling systems to be established purposefully and formally, usually in the form of written constitutions. And the most important element of these constitutions was normally freedom, which consisted of formal equality and democracy. This was to have immense influence on how scholars interpreted the medieval Icelandic commonwealth. I am not saying, however, that the liberalist development of European culture necessarily led scholars astray about the commonwealth. The possibility that some kind of liberalism, search for equality and democracy occurred in individual societies before the 18th century cannot be excluded. If it did, it is more than likely that the development of these ideals in the 18th and

³ *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders including 49 tales*. General editor: Viðar Hreinsson. I (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 36 (ch. 4). "Haraldr konungr eignaðisk í hverju fylki óðul ǫll ok allt land, byggt ok óbyggt, ok jafnvel sjóinn ok vǫtnin, ok skyldu allir búendr vera hans leiglendingar, svá þeir, er á mörkina ortu, ok saltkarlarnir ok allir veiðimenn, bæði á sjó ok landi, þá vǫru allir þeir honum lýðskyldir. En af þessi áþjǫn flýðu margir menn af landi á brott, ok byggðusk þá margar auðnir víða, bæði austr í Jamtaland ok Helsingjaland ok Vestrlǫnd, Suðreyjar, Dyflinnar skiði, Írland, Norðmandi á Vallandi, Katanes á Skotlandi, Orkneyjar ok Hjaltland, Færeysjar. Ok í þann tíma fannsk Ísland." *Egils saga*. Ed. Sigurður Nordal. Íslensk fornrit II (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), 11–12.

⁴ Arngrímur Jónsson, *Crymogæa. Þettir úr sögu Íslands*, translated by Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1985), 95 (ch. II).

19th centuries opened the eyes of scholars to these traits in earlier history. Nothing is more likely to hinder understanding of remote times than the common tendency among scholars to attribute definite characteristics to historical periods and to refuse to see anything that does not fit with those characteristics. Nevertheless, we should be certain to remember that deliberate state-building, equality and democracy were especially the ideals of the times that I am coming to now in my survey of the history of the research of this topic.

In the 19th century, two scholars dominated research on the constitutional history of medieval Iceland, the German Konrad Maurer and the Icelander Vilhjálmur Finsen, who spent most of his working lifetime in Denmark. Maurer wrote his first extensive work on the political system of the Icelandic commonwealth, *Die Entstehung des isländischen Staats und seiner Verfassung*, in 1852. There, of course, he discussed the stipulation of the law on the freedom of farmers to leave one *goðorð* and enter another one, but he added the important reservation, obviously based on evidence from sagas, that this right could in practice never be much more than a dead letter because no powerful chieftain would accept his followers leaving him to enter the *goðorð* of another chieftain.⁵ Without saying so directly, Maurer obviously doubted that the right to choose a *goðorð* could bring the farmers any real democracy when there was no state power in the country to protect them against encroachment and to secure their rights.

Vilhjálmur Finsen, on the other hand, described without reservation the stipulation of the law regarding the free choice of *goðorð*,⁶ and on the whole he was clearly more apt to see the commonwealth as a purposefully established institution. Thus he thought that the *alþing* had been established in the early 10th century with a definite number of *goðorð*, namely 36, while Maurer doubted that the number of *goðorð* had been decided until the country was divided into quarters, some three or four decades later. Maurer was of the opinion, which had been put forward earlier, that *Grágás* largely comprised customary rights, rather than law which had been passed formally, while Finsen denied this, maintaining that customary

⁵ Konrad Maurer, *Die Entstehung des isländischen Staats und seiner Verfassung* (München: Christian Kaiser, 1852), 109. — Konrad Maurer, *Upphaf allsherjarríkis á Íslandi og stjórnarskipunar þess*, translated by Sigurður Sigurðarson (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafélag, 1882), 96.

⁶ Vilhjálmur Finsen, "Om de islandske Love i Fristatstiden," *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* 1873 (1873): 202.

rights were mainly valid in the infancy of peoples, “i Folkenes Barndom” as he expressed it in Danish, but in his opinion that obviously did not apply to Iceland.⁷

One does not find much discussion about this in Icelandic in the 19th century. But after the turn of the 20th century, especially after the establishment of the University of Iceland in 1911, Icelandic scholars who were working in Iceland and mostly writing in Icelandic, took the lead in studies of the commonwealth age. The early 20th century was a period of ardent nationalism in Iceland; successful steps were made towards state formation in the country and economic progress was rapid. Of course Icelandic scholars of this time adopted the views of Vilhjálmur Finsen rather than Konrad Maurer, and portrayed the commonwealth rather incautiously as mirroring the democratic society that they were building in Iceland, an egalitarian polity where the choice of *goðorð* by farmers could be equated with elections in a representative democracy. Among these scholars were the legal historian and professor of law Ólafur Lárússon, the literary historians Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, and the historian and Marxist politician Einar Olgeirsson.⁸ The last of these, Einar Olgeirsson, even suggested that the *goðar* had been elected to their posts when the *alþing* was established. This was not entirely unsupported by the evidence, because in a 13th-century text it is said that the *goðar* were originally *chosen* (“valdir”) to be responsible for the pagan temples.⁹ Even as careful and down-to-earth a scholar as the history professor Jón Jóhannesson said, in the English translation of his *History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, that “the leaders of the country held to the idea of carefully maintaining a balance of authority between various chieftaincies, a principle which had already developed at the time of the founding of the Althing.” In the Icelandic original Jón used even a stronger word than ‘idea’; he talked about ‘hugsjón’ which could be translated more exactly as ‘ideal’ or ‘vision’.¹⁰

Jón Jóhannesson published this study in 1956, but soon after, in the late

⁷ Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning*, 30, 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 181–184.

⁹ Einar Olgeirsson, *Ættasamfélag og ríkisvald í þjóðveldi Íslendinga* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1954), 93–97.

¹⁰ Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth. Íslendinga saga*, translated by Haraldur Bessason ([S.l.]: University of Manitoba Press, 1974), 226. – Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga I. Þjóðveldisöld* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1956), 270.

1960s and 1970s, scholars seriously began to doubt this general picture of the commonwealth. Although little had been published which presented a new view on this issue, I followed the trend of the time faithfully in 1972, when I published an article on the relationship between *goðar* and the farmers and criticized the idea of seeing the choice of *goðorð* as an election of a kind.¹¹ In the first volume of *Saga Íslands* (The History of Iceland) two years later, Jakob Benediktsson wrote about the establishment of the commonwealth. He mentions, of course, the right of farmers to change their allegiance to a *goði*, but he does not mention any similarity to the modern franchise. On the contrary, he stresses the fact that farmers inevitably had to live in the neighbourhood of the *goði* they belonged to in order to enjoy his protection and to be able to support him in providing protection for other members of the *goðorð*.¹²

I have not yet mentioned the historian Björn Þorsteinsson, although he had written two books about the Icelandic commonwealth before 1970.¹³ This is because he never expressed himself very clearly about those characteristics of the political system that I have been discussing. But in his third book on the subject, *Íslensk miðaldasaga* (History of Medieval Iceland), which was published in 1978, he turned strongly against the view of the commonwealth as a democracy which had dominated in the first half of the 20th century. His chapter about *goðar* now carries the title “Forréttindastétt” (A Privileged Class). He does not even mention the farmers’ free choice of *goði*, but states that farmers seem to have been able to live without belonging to any *goðorð*, whatever the evidence for that may be. On the other hand, Björn mentions the right of *goðar* to refuse to accept a farmer into their *goðorð* and states, correctly, that there are examples of *goðar* who ousted farmers from their neighbourhood if they did not like them.¹⁴

The emphasis on opposition to the Norwegian king among commonwealth-era Icelanders has also diminished since the mid-20th century. In the first volume of *Saga Íslands* in 1974, Sigurður Línal, a professor of law and a historian, wrote a chapter about Iceland and the neighbouring world.

¹¹ Gunnar Karlsson, “Goðar og bændur,” *Saga* 10 (1972): 27–34.

¹² Jakob Benediktsson, “Landnám og upphaf allsherjarríkis,” *Saga Íslands* I, ed. by Sigurður Línal (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafélag, 1974), 173–174.

¹³ Björn Þorsteinsson, *Íslenska þjóðveldið* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1953). – Björn Þorsteinsson, *Ný Ísländssaga. Þjóðveldisöld* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1966).

¹⁴ Björn Þorsteinsson, *Íslensk miðaldasaga* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1978), 52–53.

He points out that written sources make a clear distinction between Norwegians and Icelanders, but thinks that this distinction was more based on a feeling of region than of a nation state. Further, Sigurður points out two examples from medieval sources where Icelanders living in the commonwealth period are said to have talked about Norway and Iceland as one kingdom and about themselves as the “men” of the Norwegian king.¹⁵ To mention one last example of the new view, in 1997 a young Icelandic scholar, Ármann Jakobsson, published a book called *Í leit að konungi* (In Search of a King). There he argued that the writing of the sagas of kings in Iceland reflected the Icelanders’ consideration of the idea of belonging to a kingdom, or even their wish to do so, in the century before they entered the kingdom of Norway.¹⁶

One can discern here two basically opposite views of the Icelandic commonwealth. One of them, which could be called romantic, sees it as a deliberately founded egalitarian and democratic society, albeit with its inherent weaknesses. The other one is a bleaker view which sees the commonwealth as having been shaped by external necessity, without much thought or initiative, mostly ruled by an oppressive upper class and longing for royal power some time before it submitted to it. As I mentioned, I participated in setting out this bleak view in the 1970s, but when I returned to the subject in the late 1990s and began to write my book *Goðamenning*, I felt that the revision of the romantic view had perhaps come far enough and that it was now time to establish a more balanced view. I will use the remainder of the present article to give a brief survey of my conclusions, some of them set out directly in *Goðamenning*, others more or less implied there.

IV

I do not find any pressing need to assume that the Icelandic commonwealth was founded on an idea of creating something new or original. It is well known of course that Germanic people used to come together at

¹⁵ Sigurður Línal, “Ísland og umheimurinn,” *Saga Íslands* I, ed. by Sigurður Línal (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafélag, 1974) 215–217.

¹⁶ Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi. Konungsmynd íslenskra konungasagna* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997).

assemblies to make decisions about their societies, like many other people, and had done so for centuries. As far as we know, there were three *þing*-districts in Norway when Iceland was discovered and settled. Judging mainly on the basis of place-names, *þings* were established in most or all of the Norse Viking Age colonies in the North Atlantic: the Faroes, Shetland, the Orkneys, the Isle of Man, districts in Ireland, Scotland, England, the Greenland colony.¹⁷ There is no reason to think that the Icelandic *alþing* differed initially from other such assemblies.

What about the *goðar* then, the central figures of the Icelandic *þing* system? Nowhere outside Iceland are there chieftains with this title in Christian times. The term *goði* seems to occur attached to personal names in three runic inscriptions in Denmark. It may occur in a few Swedish place-names, although it seems difficult to determine whether the places are named after the gods themselves or their servants, the *goðar*. Other instances to which attention has been drawn by scholars seem to be even more doubtful.¹⁸ I believe that the explanation why the *goði* institution was preserved in Iceland lies in the way Christianity was introduced in the country. To put it simply, among Germanic people in pagan times there were probably two kinds of chieftains with special relationship to the divinities of the time, namely kings and *goðar*. I see no reason to believe that the kings were less attached to religion than the *goðar*, and this attachment can be seen in Christian times where the first local saints were kings, such as King Olaf Haraldsson in Norway and King Knut Sveinsson in Denmark. In most European countries, amongst them the Scandinavian ones, conversion to Christianity was instigated by kings who decided to switch their allegiance from pagan gods to Christ and who used the change to consolidate the countries under their rule. In this process, the kings eradicated the *goðar* so completely that we hardly find any trace of them in written sources.

In Iceland, exactly the opposite took place. According to Ari the Learned's account of the conversion, the *goðar* decided at the *alþing* to

¹⁷ Michael Barnes, "Tingsted. Vesterhavsøyene for øvrig," *Kulturbistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder XVIII* (Reykjavik: Bókaverzlun Ísafoldar, 1974), 382–387. — Gillian Fellows-Jensen, "Tingwall, Dingwall and Thingwall," *Twenty-Eight Papers Presented to Hans Bekker-Nielsen on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday 28 April 1993* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1993), 53–63.

¹⁸ Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning*, 374–379.

change their allegiance to Christ, probably not least in order to free themselves from the interference of the king of Norway, Olaf Tryggvason, who had been forcing his subjects to accept Christianity for four or five years. The Icelanders were not able to eradicate royalty in the same way as Scandinavian kings probably eradicated the *goðar* in their countries, because no king was present in Iceland. We can speculate, though, that the reason why the Icelanders were usually so sure that they did not belong to the Norwegian kingdom was an elimination of royalty of a kind, comparable to the elimination of the *goðar* in Scandinavia.

This is of course not meant to be an exhaustive description of the process of conversion. I am also well aware that I have little evidence for my interpretation. What I am suggesting is only that it is possible to explain the special characteristics of the political system of Iceland, with the *goðar* as central figures and devoid of royal authority, without assuming that it was established purposefully and intended to represent something entirely new.

It is not my role here to talk about literary culture. Nevertheless I might add that the uniqueness of medieval Icelandic literature can be explained by the theory that Iceland kept its class of priests through the conversion. At the same time, the status of literature supports the theory of a unique process of conversion. My suggestion is not least intended to explain how Icelandic skalds seem to have monopolized Norwegian and even Danish court poetry after the conversion, how Icelanders gained their reputation as experts on history of Scandinavian kings in the late 12th century, as testified by the Scandinavian authors Theodoricus and Saxo, and how 13th- and 14th-century Iceland managed to produce classical literature.

V

One characteristic of the political system of Iceland is its apparent elaborateness. To mention one measurable variable, the law code of Iceland is about three times longer than the longest law-books of Scandinavia.¹⁹ I suggest that the excessive growth of the legal text in Iceland can be explained by the absence of executive power in the country. In a society

¹⁹ Ibid., 434–435.

where no one single party or system of officials had the role of keeping law and order, feud and minor warfare must have been a constant nuisance. It seems likely that people tried to restrict this nuisance by setting down rules about as many possible moot points as they could possibly think of.

When we come to the content of the laws, the most distinctive feature of the Icelandic ruling system is the separation of legislative and judicial power, which is said to have been all but unknown in Europe until the 18th century. In Norway, the *lögrétta* was predominantly a court of justice, although the name of the institution, *lög-rétta*, “law-corrector” indicates that its original role was to ensure that the law of the district was kept correctly at all times. Because of this and other differences that scholars find between Norwegian and Icelandic law, it has sometimes even been doubted that Ari’s statement in his *Book of the Icelanders*, that the Icelanders based their law on the Norwegian Gulapingslög, can be correct.²⁰ On this question Icelandic scholars have followed the lead of Vilhjálmur Finsen, who stated that the Norwegian system was “primitive and imperfect” compared to the Icelandic one.²¹

It appears to me that this difference between Norwegian and Icelandic law has been greatly exaggerated. The hierarchy of courts is even more complicated in Gulapingslög than in *Grágás*; in Gulapingslög cases are supposed to start in *ad hoc* courts nominated by the litigants and they can go through *skiladómr*, *fjórðungsping*, *fylkisping* and finally to *lögrétta* at Gulaping itself.²² This makes five successive instances, whereas in Iceland the instances are three at most: *vorping*, *fjórðungsdómr* and *fimmtardómr*. It is true that the distinction between the legislative role of the *lögrétta* and the judicial role of the courts in Iceland appears to be remarkably modern. But I do not find anything that makes it likely that this was done in order to secure the impartiality of the courts, as was the purpose of independent courts in 18th-century Europe. The *goðar*, the holders of legislative power, nominated all judges to all courts from the farmers in their following, and there are no stipulations in the law to secure the independence of judges

²⁰ Ólafur Lárusson, *Lög og saga*, ed. by Lögfræðingafélag Íslands (Reykjavík: Hlaðbúð, 1958), 120.

²¹ Vilhjálmur Finsen, “Om de islandske Love i Fristatstiden,” 206n (“den primitive, mindre fuldkomne Character, som viser sig i den norske Ordning”).

²² *Den eldre Gulatingslova*, ed. by Bjørn Eithun, Magnus Rindal, Tor Ulset (Oslo: Riksarkivet, 1994), 146–148 (ch. 266).

vis-à-vis *goðar*. The peculiar development of the Icelandic court system seems to be a consequence of a short-lived attempt to establish quarter *þings*, one in each quarter of the country. Thereby, the judicial power of the *alþing* was moved away from it, and when the quarter *þings* were abandoned, perhaps because they did not prove practical, they were succeeded by quarter courts at the *alþing*. This is my interpretation of the process, admittedly based on rather little evidence, but that is the best I can offer.²³

VI

The last point I wish to discuss here is the question of democracy. Is it true that the Icelandic commonwealth was a democratic society? And, if so, was this democracy invented in Iceland? It is easy to give a negative answer: the commonwealth was of course not what we call a democracy nowadays. Only a limited group of men could inherit a *goðorð*. The right of farmers to choose between *goðar* was seriously restricted. Only male farmers had this right, no women and no male farmhands had any formal say in the choice. But it seems to me more fruitful to look at the question of democracy in a different way. Long ago, the Austrian-English historian Walter Ullmann wrote that the history of political ideas in the Middle Ages was to a large extent about two conflicting theories of government: the ascending one, which maintained that original power was located in the people, and the descending one, which saw the original power as located in a supreme being. The ascending theory is the earlier one according to Ullmann.²⁴ It seems to me fruitful to look at the question of democracy in the light of this distinction and to call all ascending power an indication of democracy, however small and imperfect. Seen in that way, there is no doubt that there were conflicting forces of democratic and anti-democratic traits operative in the Icelandic commonwealth. It seems tempting to believe that there was somewhat more freedom in Iceland than in Europe in general, when royal power gained increased control in European kingdoms, although there too, royal power differed greatly from one district and one time to another. Anyway, if there was more democracy in Iceland there is no rea-

²³ Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning*, 121–128.

²⁴ Walter Ullmann, *Medieval Political Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 12–13.

son to believe that it was created by the Icelanders; it was most likely a tradition which the original settlers brought with them to the country.²⁵

VII

In general, it is my conclusion that medieval Iceland enjoyed, in many ways, an interestingly distinctive political culture. But there is little reason to think that this was due to the inventiveness or ideals of the people of Iceland. It was above all due to the distance from royal power. It was the Atlantic Ocean with its high waves and predominant westerly winds which kept the arms of kings away from the country for more than three centuries after human habitation began there.

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²⁵ Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning*, 199–202.

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SUMMARY

The political system of the Icelandic commonwealth has been described in two different ways. Some scholars, especially those from the early and mid-twentieth century, regarded it as the product of a conscious attempt to create a new kind of democracy, unparalleled anywhere else at the time. Other scholars, especially towards the end of the same century, tended to view the Icelandic commonwealth as a variation on the kind of political organisation found elsewhere in medieval Europe, dominated by a small ruling elite for several centuries while the nation was without a monarchy, because of its geographical isolation from mainland Europe. This paper offers a third possible characterisation, whereby the Icelandic commonwealth may be seen, in essence, as a remnant of an older Germanic political culture in which general assemblies (*þing*) played a key role. The unique nature of the Icelanders' conversion to Christianity exercised a decisive influence on their

subsequent system of government. Most Germanic nations were converted to Christianity when individual kings decided to abandon their heathen deities in favour of the Christian God, thereby compelling their followers to adopt Christianity. So total was the disappearance of heathen priests that evidence of their title, *goði*, was scarcely to be found anywhere thereafter. In Iceland, on the other hand, the *goðar* decided to accept Christianity; they therefore retained secular power, and royal power did not reach the country for another two and a half centuries. Because of this the Icelandic political system developed several distinctive features. There were attempts to compensate for the lack of specific holders of executive powers through the development of comprehensive legislation and a system of law courts. Evidence for an element of democracy could certainly be found in the sense that the power of the rulers was dependent on the power of their subordinates, but, in all probability, this was a remnant of an ancient Germanic peasant community, and had survived in the absence of a king. There is scant evidence to support the notion that the political system of the Icelandic commonwealth was consciously innovative. Nevertheless, it is likely that this system of government did play a part in the creation of one of the greatest innovations of European medieval culture, Icelandic literature.

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