

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson

*Chieftains and Power in the
Icelandic Commonwealth*

Translated by Jean Lundskær-
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Odense University Press, Odense,
1999, pp. 215

The book under review is a translation of a Ph. D. thesis from the University of Bergen, and betrays its origins in a number of ways. Like so many other theses of its kind it is brimming with enthusiasm for its subject and devoid of the cynicism we often find in the works of older scholars. On the other hand, the author's (hereafter referred to as JVS) perception of early Icelandic literature is somewhat vague at times.

The essential purpose of the book is to describe the nature and evolution of political power in Iceland, in particular the system of *goðar* (sg. *goði*), the chieftains who served as active members of the legislative body (*lögrétta*) at the Althing and appointed judges to the courts; besides, the *goðar* had certain other roles, mostly at the local level. In pagan times, the *goðar* had sacerdotal as well as secular duties; it was their business to maintain a temple and hold sacrificial feasts. When the Althing was founded in 930 there were 36 chieftains but their number was increased in 965 when the country was divided into Quarters. JVS suggests that this figure was on the increase until middle of the eleventh century when there may have been

as many as 50-60 chieftencies. After that their number started decreasing, and by 1118 there were no more than c. 30 left. "There was a similar reduction in numbers in the period from 1118 to 1220, when about 20 disappeared" (p. 64). So early in the thirteenth century there were only nine or ten chieftains in the entire country controlling as many 'domains', instead of the thirty-six chieftencies back in 930. The original power system had in fact collapsed.

JVS's account of this development is partly based on conjecture, but on the whole it is lucid and well-argued. My principal criticism of his book is about his treatment of the Sagas of Icelanders, which tell us much more about the *goðar* and ideas relating to them than his book serves to indicate. *Vatnsdæla saga* which has been called *höfðingja skuggsjá* "a mirror for chieftains" presents Þorsteinn Ingimundarson as an ideal *goði*: he is moderate, fair-minded, patient, shrewd, well-spoken, hospitable, a reliable friend who is endowed with good-luck and shows no mercy to trouble-makers. Other model *goðar* include Arnkell in *Eyrbyggja saga*, who "was remarkably shrewd in judgement, good-tempered, kind-hearted, brave, honest and moderate. He came out on top in every lawsuit", and Áskell in *Reykðæla saga*. Other sagas describe chieftains who arrogate to themselves certain powers and privileges which belonged to absolute monarchs. Thus, the title hero of *Hrafnkels saga* slays his own innocent and unarmed shepherd and insists on his right to kill with impunity. The saga author may have had in mind the *Kings'*

Mirror, according to which the ruler of Norway had such a right; should he have an innocent person put to death he was guilty of murder before God, but it was beyond the powers of mortal men to punish him for the crime. *Ófeigs þátr*, on the other hand, is about a wealthy and powerful *goði* who modelled himself on ruling monarchs by travelling every spring with a large retinue to a certain valley and expecting local farmers of modest means to offer him hospitality for many days. A single visit from this demanding chieftain could leave his host destitute. Both *Bandamanna saga* and *Ólkofra saga* satirise corrupt chieftains who gang together and bend the law in order to make immoral gains out of other people's mistakes. Such sagas appear to serve the dual purpose of evoking images of the past, whether or not they were based on fact, and also of using them as warnings to people to stay on their guard against leaders who broke the law instead of instead of protecting it.

Proof-reading should have been better. I find it hard to believe that the author deliberately wanted his readers to think that the terms *örlög*, *forlög* ['fate', 'destiny'] denoted 'faith', as is bluntly stated on p. 35, and it wouldn't surprise me if note 76 on p. 106 is going to raise an eyebrow or two: "*Bændakirkjur* (the farmers churches farms) were farms which the church on the farm only owned a part of the farm, or a part of other farms."

Hermann Pálsson

Brian Smith

Toons and Tenants: Settlement and Society in Shetland, 1299-1899

Shetland Times Ltd., Lerwick, 2000

108pp, £13.99

Brian Smith needs little introduction to readers of *Northern Studies*, well known as he is both for his encyclopaedic knowledge of Shetland records and for his ability to make sense of the often bewildering technical vocabulary to be found therein. A subject which he has particularly made his own is the complex issue of rents, taxation and land tenure in Shetland, and *Toons and Tenants* brings together Brian Smith's thoughts on the subject, from Shetland's earliest document (an account of disputes over rent on Papa Stour in 1299) to the borders of living memory.

There are four main articles, written over a period of sixteen years, together with shorter notes to explain technical terms such as 'toonmels' and 'waith'. There is also a useful appendix which presents in full a number of texts quoted more selectively in the articles. Of the articles, two ('The letter of 1299 about Papa Stour' and 'Lasts of Land') are recent work, while the others ('What is a Scattald?' and 'Rents from the Sea') are revised versions of earlier publications. 'What is a Scattald?' in particular contains major revisions in the light both of the chronology of land tenure established in Brian Smith's more recent work and of the research of others. Revisions include useful discussion of the etymology of the