

## Iceland's 'Foreign Bishops' and the Icelanders

The eight decades from 1380 to 1460 represent something of a blip in Iceland's ecclesiastical history. Previously, and thereafter to the Reformation, all of the bishops to hold office in its two sees, Skálholt and Hólar, were either native Icelanders or Norwegians. By contrast, of the sixteen<sup>1</sup> bishops consecrated between these dates, just three were Norwegian or Icelandic; the other thirteen came variously from England, Denmark, Sweden and the Holy Roman Empire. This striking anomaly has not gone unnoticed by Icelandic historians, and it is common in Icelandic historiography to see this part of the island's ecclesiastical history referred to as the era of the *útlendir biskupar*, 'foreign bishops'<sup>2</sup>.

That term often has a pejorative undertone to it, as Icelandic historiography has traditionally viewed the Late Middle Ages as a period of national malaise, and the foreign bishops as notably venal overbearing and prone to quarrelling with the secular aristocracy.<sup>3</sup> This is an unfair generalisation, as more recent historians have pointed out,<sup>4</sup> but while the subject of interactions between these bishops and the Icelanders has not exactly been neglected in recent scholarship, it has almost always been treated implicitly as merely an aspect of the church's history during this period<sup>5</sup>. My objective here, therefore, is to address it explicitly, and while this article does not have the scope to go into a detailed analysis, I intend to provide a chronological overview of Icelandic interactions with the foreign bishops, to draw some observations and tentative inferences from this, and to make some suggestions for future research on the subject.

The first of the foreign bishops was a Dane called Michael Magnússon,<sup>6</sup> who was provided to Skálholt in 1382/3.<sup>7</sup> Michael was also significant in being the first '*páfabiskup*' (that is, a bishop appointed by the pope, rather than appointed by the Archbishop of Nidaros) in

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<sup>1</sup> I have admittedly used the most liberal possible count, including several individuals who are only attested once or twice, such as Truto, purportedly Bishop of Hólar (fl.1425).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Oluf Kolsrud, *Noregs Kyrkjesoga, I. Millomalderen* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., 1958), p.281; Björn Þorsteinsson & Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 'Enska öldin', in *Saga Íslands* vol. 5, ed. Sigurður Lindal (Reykjavík: Sögufélagið, 1990), p.65; Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, *Íslenskt samfélag og Rómakirkja*, Kristni á Íslandi II (Reykjavík: Alþingi, 2000), p.118; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Island og Nidaros', in *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis 1153-1537: Søkelys på Nidaroskirkens og Nidarosprovinsens historie*, ed. Steinar Imsen (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2003), p.133. The term *útlendr* 'foreign' does not apply to Norwegians in this context as at this time Iceland was attached to Norway both temporally, as a possession of the Norwegian crown, and ecclesiastically as part of the Norwegian church province.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Þorvaldur Thorodssen, *Landfræðissaga Íslands: Hugmyndir manna um Ísland, náttúruskoðun þess og rannsóknir, fyrr og síðar*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja, 1892), p.106.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, *Íslenskt samfélag*, pp.123-4

<sup>5</sup> Good recent histories of the Icelandic church during these years include Björn Þorsteins & Guðrún Ása Gríms, 'Enska öldin', pp.33-66; Gunnar F. Guðmunds, *Íslenskt samfélag*; and Gunnar Kristjánsson, ed., *Saga Biskupastólanna* (Akureyri: Bókaútgáfan Hólar, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> With regards to the orthography of names, I generally use the Old Icelandic forms as found in Oluf Kolsrud, *Den norske Kirkes Erkebiskoper og Biskoper indtil Reformationen* (Christiania: Det Mallingske Bogtrykkeri, 1913). The principal exceptions are the three English bishops, for whom I use the standard English forms of their names (so *John* Craxton rather than *Jón* Craxton).

<sup>7</sup> Gustav Storm, ed., *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578* (Christiania: Grøndahl & Søn's Bogtrykkeri, 1888), pp.282, 414

Iceland<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, it is striking how closely the era of *páfabiskupar* corresponds to that of the foreign bishops – both periods began with Michael in the early 1380s, and both ended around the year 1460<sup>9</sup>.

In any event, Michael proved to be a controversial bishop. The ‘Flatey Annals’ and ‘Lawman’s Annals’ report that by the late 1380s, ‘Many priests [were] devoid of office in the diocese of Skálholt and many novelties [were] instituted by Bishop Michael’.<sup>10</sup> The implication of the former statement is that the unemployed priests were dismissed from their offices by Bishop Michael, and he certainly had form according to the ‘Gottskálk’s Annals’, which explicitly record his dismissal in 1387 of Þorgerðr, Abbess of Kirkjubær. However, the annalist Lawman’s Annals report that in the same year a letter of protest was read out against Michael at the Alþingi (an annual general assembly of Icelandic freemen), prompting him to return to the Continent the following year.<sup>11</sup> He was not the first Icelandic bishop ever to have been forced out of his see (after all Guðmundur Arason, Bishop of Hólar in the early thirteenth century, had spent the majority of his episcopal career in exile), but he was the first in almost two hundred years, and the first since the fall of the Icelandic Commonwealth. A further measure of the alarm which his actions had provoked can be found in the response of the Icelandic annalists the next time a new bishop was provided to them by the pope, in 1392. The section of the Flatey Annals’ entry for that year pertaining to the new prelate, Pétur Nikulásson, reads as follows:

‘The bishop [ rode home to Hólar in the autumn and with him the priest Jón Magnússon; a Danish monk who was called Enis; Lord Sveinn; the priest Matthías, a relation of the bishop; Sveinn the deacon; Pétur gammi, a cook; a servant – all of them Danish. Þorsteinn the clerk, a Norwegian; Jón slétr, and Ormr, a Shetlander. The Reverend Einarr Hafliðason kept the position of *officialis* and all his power and was in the greatest friendship with the bishop. The Reverend Þórðr kept the management of Hólar... The bishop allowed all the priests to keep their powers. Lord Abbot Þorsteinn kept all his powers and the diocese was thought then to be in rather good standing.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Some scholars maintain that he was in fact the second, preceded by Jón skalli Eiríksson, who was translated to Hólar from the see of Garðar, in Greenland, in 1358 (see for example Björn Þorsteins & Guðrún Ása Gríms, ‘Enska öldin’, pp.40-1). However, Jón’s translation was technically carried out by the Archbishop of Nidaros, albeit on the orders of Pope Innocent VI (see Kolsrud, *Den norske*, p.275).

<sup>9</sup> The two phenomena are clearly related, and much ink has been spilt debating how much importance the pontiffs attached to a candidate’s place of origin when making provisions to the Icelandic dioceses, and also the extent to which they were influenced by the interests of the crown. The most recent work on this topic has been done by Eldbjørg Haug; for a concise English summary of her views see Eldbjørg Haug, ‘The metropolitan, the king and the bishops in “Norgesveldet”’, in ‘*Ecclesia Nidrosiensis*’ and ‘*Noregs veldi*’: *The role of the Church in the making of Norwegian domination in the Norse World*, ed. Steinar Imsen (Trondheim: Akademika, 2012), pp.83-4, 89-93.

<sup>10</sup> Storm, *Annaler*, pp.283, 415 – *embættis lausir margir prestar i Skalhottz bviskupsdæmi ok margar nylundr giorfar af Michele byskupi*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.283

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.418-9 – *reid byskup heim til Hóla þegar vm haustid ok med honum Jonn prest Magnusson. brodir einn danskr er Enis het herra Sueinn prestr mathis skyldr byskupi. Sueinn diakn Petr gammi steikari smasueinn*

This passage is noteworthy for several reasons. In the first place it is by some distance the longest comment made about the arrival of any bishop in the Icelandic annals, and the only one to describe an episcopal entourage in detail (by way of comparison, all the annals say about Michael's entourage was that it was ten-strong, and the entourages of most bishops are not mentioned at all). Moreover it is striking how the annalist places such emphasis on Pétur's prepermission to dismiss any priests or reassign the diocesan offices, and moreover on the approval with which this decision was received, presumably by the clergy of the diocese. The obvious implication is that there had been widespread fear among these men that Pétur would dismiss large numbers of priests from their benefices as Michael had done.<sup>13</sup> Given that Pétur shared a number of characteristics with Michael – he was likewise a *páfabiskup*, a Dane, a Dominican, and none other than Michael's direct successor as papal minor penitentiary for Dacia<sup>14</sup> – it was certainly not unreasonable to expect that he would pursue the same policies as his exiled colleague.

As far as we can tell, the annalist's fears were groundless. Both Einarr and Þórðr resigned in 1393, the latter 'because things grew rather cold between him and the bishop',<sup>15</sup> with the aforementioned Jón Magnússon succeeding to both offices. However, there is no suggestion that any other priests were dismissed, and the annal goes on to describe Pétur's first mass later that year and comments, 'there was then a large crowd, and the bishop provided for [them] very well',<sup>16</sup> which would appear to imply that Pétur remained popular despite the departures of Einarr and Þórðr. There are no subsequent annalistic entries relating to Pétur, although the carefully maintained *máldagar* (church inventories) from his episcopate suggest that he was a conscientious bishop who saw assiduously to the upkeep of his see.<sup>17</sup>

There are also few records pertaining to Michael's successor, another Danish Dominican called Vilkin Henriksson, or to the next two bishops, both of whom were called Jón. The lack of attention paid to them in the annals would appear to imply that they successfully avoided conflict with their diocesans, although the recent onslaught of the Black Death (which only reached Iceland half a century after it had devastated the rest of Europe) may also be partially responsible for this silence.

The political situation in Iceland was turned on its head around 1410 by the appearance of large numbers of English vessels in Icelandic waters, driven north by motivated by the need to seek out new fisheries. Their presence flouted the royal decree, first promulgated in 1361, that gave the merchants of Bergen a monopoly on all trade with Iceland

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*allir danskir. Þorstein klerkr norðnn mann. Jonn slettr ok Ormr hialltlenzskr mann. hellt sira Einar Haflida son offioliatus starfui ok allri sinni makt ok var i mestum kærleikum vid byskup. hellt sira Þorðr Hola raadam... byskup alla presta hallda sinum vaullum. hellt herra Þorsteinn abboti ollum sinum volldum ok þotti þa byskupsdæmid helldr vel standanda.* The English translation is the present author's own, as are all others unless otherwise specified.

<sup>13</sup> See Erika R. Sigurdson, *The Church in Fourteenth-Century Iceland: Ecclesiastical Administration, Literacy and the Formation of an Elite Clerical Identity* (Leeds: Unpublished Leeds University PhD Thesis), pp.150-2 for discussion of this passage, and of the instability and anxiety which a new bishop's arrival was liable to cause even in more propitious circumstances.

<sup>14</sup> Björn Þorsteins & Guðrún Ása Gríms, 'Enska öldin', p.41

<sup>15</sup> Storm, *Annaler*, p.420 – *af þii at fætkadizst helldr med þeim byskupi.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.421 – *var þar þa mikit fiolmenni ok veitti byskupinn hardla sæmiliga.*

<sup>17</sup> Björn Þorsteins & Guðrún Ása Gríms, 'Enska öldin', p.44

and banned foreign vessels from entering Icelandic waters.<sup>18</sup> Moreover their exportation of fish directly from Iceland to England, bypassing Bergen, cheated the king out of revenues he would otherwise have received by means of the *sekkjagjald* ('sack money'), a 5% tariff on all Icelandic exports collected in Bergen.<sup>19</sup> The royal authorities therefore attempted to drive the English seafarers out of Iceland, triggering a series of simmering conflicts which the Icelandic historian Björn Þorsteinsson has described as Cod Wars (*þorskastríð*) in allusion to the modern fishing dispute.<sup>20</sup>

However, while the authorities were determined to expel the English, opinion among the Icelanders seems to have been more nuanced. On the one hand the English seafarers were responsible for numerous acts of petty theft and violence,<sup>21</sup> but on the other hand their presence gave a timely boost to the Icelandic economy, which the Norwegian crown had woefully neglected since the reign of Magnus Eriksson.<sup>22</sup> The more prosperous Icelandic farmers were able to sell their excess produce to the English to provision them on their fishing expeditions, and according to some estimates the chieftain Guðmundur ríki Arason quadrupled his fortune in twenty years by this means.<sup>23</sup> Naturally such men resented attempts by royal officials to interfere with the English operations in Iceland, and in 1419 thirteen of them even sent a letter to the king, Erik of Pomerania, in which they insisted that they be allowed to trade with those Englishmen 'who went with peace and honest trade'.<sup>24</sup> They did however assure him that they had already punished with 'those doggers and fishermen who have robbed and committed violence',<sup>25</sup> testifying to the concerns many Icelanders had about the often lawless English presence in the country.

The Icelandic-born *hirðstjóri* (royal governor) Vigfús Ívarsson was among those who cooperated with the English, and in 1413 Erik of Pomerania dismissed him from the office and awarded it instead to the new Bishop of Skálholt, Árni Ólafsson,<sup>26</sup> who therefore became the first man to hold Iceland's highest secular and spiritual offices simultaneously. He was also unusual in being a native Icelander, the only one to hold episcopal office in the country between 1348 and 1460, and seemingly one from a prominent family given that a nephew of his held the title of *lögmaður* 'lawman', another important office in late mediaeval Iceland.<sup>27</sup>

Árni had been in Erik's service for some years prior to 1413,<sup>28</sup> and the king no doubt hoped that he could rely on him to enforce the trade ban, but the bishop proved to be a disappointment in this respect. He did not openly collaborate with the English as Vigfús had done, but nor did he make any great effort to clamp down on their activities, and moreover he

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<sup>18</sup> *Diplomatarium Norwegicum*, vol. III #150 (pp.178-9)

<sup>19</sup> Grethe Authén Blom, *Magnus Eriksson og Island. Til bleysning av periferi og sentrum i nordisk 1300-talls historie* (Oslo: Det kongelige norske Videnskabernes Selskab, 1983), pp.23-4

<sup>20</sup> Björn Þorsteinsson, *Tíu þorskastríð 1415-1976* (Reykjavík: Sögufélagið, 1976)

<sup>21</sup> Wetzig, 'Jón Gerrekssons Ende', pp.86-8; Björn Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin*, pp.74-82, 201-22

<sup>22</sup> Blom, *Magnus Eriksson, passim*; Karl Ludwig Wetzig, 'Jón Gerrekssons Ende oder Wie Island beinahe englisch geworden wäre', *Hansische Geschichtsblätter* 114 (1996): pp.61-104; Björn Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin í sögu Íslendinga* (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1970), 37-8

<sup>23</sup> Wetzig, 'Jón Gerrekssons Ende', pp.80, 75, 95-6

<sup>24</sup> *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, vol. IV #330 (p.268) – þy vpp aa gudz naadh. oc ydart traust hofum wij wordit kaupslaga met vtlændska men sæm medh fridh hafua fareit oc Rettum kaupninghskap oc til [hafs] hafua siglt.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* – En þeir duggarar oc fiskarar sæm reyfat hafua oc ofridh giortt þæim hofum wij refsa latidh.

<sup>26</sup> Storm, *Annaler*, p.292

<sup>27</sup> Björn Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin*, p.46

<sup>28</sup> Haug, 'The role of the Church', p.93

bankrupted the diocese by his liberality and generosity, which led to his recall to Norway in 1420.<sup>29</sup> However, these very same attributes earned him the nickname ‘Árni the mild’ in Icelandic sources, and they give very favourable descriptions of his character and early life, although they are oddly reticent about the actual events of his episcopate.<sup>30</sup>

By 1426 both dioceses were empty again, and the provisions that Pope Martin V eventually made to them were oddly contradictory. First, in March 1426, the pontiff provided for Skálholt, at King Erik’s request, a former Archbishop of Uppsala named Jón Gerreksson. Jón must have seemed to many an odd choice, as he had been forced to resign from his post at Uppsala in disgrace after being accused of all manner of misdemeanours by the Uppsala chapter. However, he was from a family with close connections to the Danish government, his uncle Peder Jensen Lodehat being both Bishop of Roskilde and chancellor of Denmark, and while he was not actually given the title of *hirðstjóri* it is clear that Erik saw him as his principal agent in Iceland. Such is the impression given anyway by the fact that the bishop was sent to Iceland with a small force of Danish troops.<sup>31</sup> Ostensibly they were mere bodyguards, but Jón did not hesitate to employ them in more proactive roles – according to some accounts one of his first actions upon arriving in Iceland was to arrest and briefly imprison two of the most prominent chieftains, Þorvarðr Loftsson and Teitr Gunnlaugsson.<sup>32</sup> Despite this some annals report that Jón was initially well-received, and that within a year of his arrival ‘the people had become somewhat fast-friendly with the bishop’.<sup>33</sup>

A month after he provided Jón to Skálholt, Pope Martin provided to Hólar an English monk named John Craxton. Craxton paid an unusually large fee to the curia upon his consecration, probably reflecting the financial backing of English merchants keen to get a friendly bishop installed in Iceland.<sup>34</sup> The new bishop did not receive the warmest of welcomes from his new diocesans. Upon arriving in Iceland, the Lawman’s Annals report that, ‘He rode to the Alþingi and presented his letter. The Northlanders were not entirely tender toward him. The lord sailed away the same summer and did not come to his see.’<sup>35</sup> Craxton eventually established himself in Hólar two years later, but his relations with the Icelanders remained tense, and in 1430 he triggered a major dispute by his attempts to dismiss Jón Pálsson, the priest at Grenjaðarstaður, and replace him with Þorkell Guðbjartsson. Jón responded by turning up to a diocesan synod with a thirty-strong armed entourage, and Craxton retaliated by placing him under a ban.<sup>36</sup> The following year he openly sided with his compatriots against his diocesans by giving sanctuary to some fugitive English merchants at Hólar after they were attacked by the local people. Indeed he even bought a half-share in their ship, the *Bartholomew*, thereby protecting them from future attack by making the Church a co-owner of the vessel.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Storm, *Annaler*, p.293

<sup>30</sup> Björn Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin*, p.50

<sup>31</sup> Björn Þorsteinsson & Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, ‘Enska öldin’, p.58; Wetzig, ‘Jón Gerrekssons Ende’, p.63

<sup>32</sup> Wetzig, ‘Jón Gerrekssons Ende’, p.66

<sup>33</sup> Storm, *Annaler*, p.295

<sup>34</sup> Haug, ‘The role of the Church’, p.98; *Diplomatarium Norwegicum*, vol. XVII #446 (p.353)

<sup>35</sup> Storm, *Annaler*, p.294: *reid hann til alþingis oc tieðe sin bref. tokv Nordlendingar honuym ecki all blitt. sigldi herrann burt samsvams oc kom ecki til stols sins.*

<sup>36</sup> *Diplomatarium Islandicum* vol. IV #457 (pp.415-6); Björn Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin*, p.136

<sup>37</sup> *Diplomatarium Norwegicum* vol. XX #790-1 (pp.63-6) = *Diplomatarium Islandicum* vol. IV #516, 518 (pp. 475-6, 477-9)

The simmering tensions around both bishops reached a head at the Alþingi of 1431, whereat six prominent Icelanders drew up a remarkable letter to Erik of Pomerania in which they declared their refusal to accept ‘all the new un-laws which bishops and other powerful men wish to impose with bans, summonses or visitations’, and vowed not to permit foreigners, ‘especially Englishmen and Germans’ to overwinter in Iceland.<sup>38</sup> They also declared that anyone who brought Danes or Swedes into Iceland would be responsible for any crimes those men committed in the country, a passage clearly aimed at Jón Gerreksson given that his force of bodyguards was the only sizeable group of Danes or Swedes in the country at the time.

If this letter was meant as a warning to Jón, it was clearly deemed to have failed by 1433, when the bishop was seized and drowned in the Brúará river by a posse led by Þorvarðr Loftsson, one of the men whom he had arrested when he first came to Iceland seven years previously. Gottskálk’s Annals, the only set of annals to describe the killing, claim that Þorvarðr undertook the action on behalf of Margrét, sister of Ívarr Hólmr Vigfusson (son of Vigfús Ívarsson, the pro-English *hirðstjóri* of the early 1410s), to avenge a recent attempt on Ívarr’s life by Jón’s henchmen.<sup>39</sup> However, a number of modern scholars have suggested that Þorvarðr was also acting on behalf of the broader pro-English faction in Iceland, perhaps even with the connivance of Craxton himself.<sup>40</sup>

Pope Eugene translated Craxton to Skálholt in 1435 to fill the vacancy produced by Jón Gerreksson’s killing, and appointed another Englishman, John Bloxwich, to occupy John’s former see at Hólar. Bloxwich never attempted to do so in person,<sup>41</sup> and Craxton himself was back in England by November 1436, and did not return to his diocese subsequently.<sup>42</sup>

In 1436 the Council of Basel declared that the power to provide bishops for the dioceses of the Norwegian church province should rest not with the papacy but with Aslak Bolt, the Archbishop of Nidaros. It appears Aslak soon made use of his new authority to appoint his own nominee to Skálholt, for in 1437 a Dutch cleric called Godsvin Comhaer is attested in Iceland as Bishop of Skálholt. Godsvin’s father had been a moneyer for Erik the Pomeranian, and he himself had been suggested by Erik as a candidate for the Bishopric of Bergen in 1432;<sup>43</sup> it thus seems clear that Godsvin had been appointed to Skálholt by Erik and Aslak in direct challenge to John Craxton, who remained the rightful Bishop of Skálholt, at least as far as he and presumably also Pope Eugene were concerned.

Godsvin does not seem to have had any problem establishing his authority in Skálholt, and there is no evidence that he became embroiled in conflict with his diocesans at any point during his episcopate. On the contrary, he managed to resolve the dispute over

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<sup>38</sup> *Diplomatarium Islandicum* vol. IV #506 (pp.461-2) = *Diplomatarium Norwegicum* vol. XX #789 (pp.62-3) – *Allar nýar aalogur sem biskupar og adrer valldzmen vilia aa leggja med banne, firirbiodun eda yferreidum...sierliga ensker oc þysker*

<sup>39</sup> Storm, *Annaler*, p.370. The attack against Ívarr’s life resulted in the so-called ‘Kirkjubólsbrenna’, for which see Björn Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin*, pp.130-2

<sup>40</sup> Björn Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin*, pp.134-6; Wetzig, ‘Jón Gerrekssons Ende’, pp.65-8; Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, *Íslenskt samfélag*, pp.121-3; Haug, ‘The role of the Church’, pp.96-8

<sup>41</sup> Kolsrud, *Den norske*, pp.277-8

<sup>42</sup> *Diplomatarium Islandicum* vol. IV #602 (pp.563-4), 613 (pp.573-4)

<sup>43</sup> Gryte Anne Piebenga, ‘Godsvin Comhaer Skalhóltsbiskup 1435-1446’, trans. Þórhildur Sigurðardóttir, *Saga* 25 (1987), pp.196-201

Grenjaðarstaður which had been started by John Craxton,<sup>44</sup> and demonstrated his concern for the welfare and dignity of the Church by establishing new regulations designed to prevent stolen goods being used in the Eucharist.<sup>45</sup> As a result of these initiatives he has enjoyed a universally positive reputation among later historians.<sup>46</sup>

Having succeeded in installing one of his appointees in Skálholt, Aslak attempted to do the same in Hólar in 1440. The man he chose was a priest from Telemark called Gottskalk Kœnekason. Gottskalk was a great-nephew of Jón skalli, the Norwegian cleric who had been Bishop of Hólar from 1358 to 1390, and was thus the first relative of a former Icelandic bishop to gain episcopal office himself since Árni Helgason a hundred and forty years previously.<sup>47</sup> Family connections had traditionally been very important for bishops in Iceland, and Aslak's choice of Gottskalk could be interpreted as a sop to Icelandic sensibilities. Certainly it seems that the Icelandic clergy were now in a position to refuse to accept bishops of whom they did not approve, given that fourteen of them had to publish a letter confirming the legitimacy of Gottskalk's appointment before he could take up office at Hólar.<sup>48</sup>

Gottskalk's English rival John Bloxwich resigned in 1441, and Pope Eugene immediately appointed another Englishman, Robert Wodborn, as his successor, but Wodborn made no attempt to travel out to Iceland and Gottskalk was therefore able to occupy his see unopposed.<sup>49</sup> Wodborn would in fact prove to be the last Englishman to hold episcopal office in Iceland.

Godsvin resigned in 1446,<sup>50</sup> and Pope Nicholas V provided Marcellus of Nievern<sup>51</sup> as his successor. It is likely that at roughly the same time Nicholas also provided a certain Mathæus to the bishopric of Hólar, in opposition to Gottskalk Kœnekason, as several documents dated to the year 1450 mention a *Mathias Holensis* in company with Marcellus.<sup>52</sup> However, for the time being the two men remained in Norway, and both Icelandic dioceses were therefore administered by Gottskalk until his death in 1457.<sup>53</sup>

At this juncture thirty priests from Gottskalk's diocese came together at Víðivellir to elect one of their number, Ólafur Rögnvaldsson, as their new bishop.<sup>54</sup> This was the first time in over two hundred years that the bishop of an Icelandic diocese had been nominated in Iceland (although he still had to go to Nidaros to be consecrated by the archbishop), and the priests justified this novel procedure on the basis that: *Heilog kirkia hefuer oft komit j storan skada ok mykin kwant af þeirra biskupum sem til kirkionar hafua warit skipader swmer med*

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<sup>44</sup> Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, *Íslenskt samfélag*, p.124

<sup>45</sup> Piebenga, 'Godsvin Comhaer', p.202

<sup>46</sup> Jón Helgason, *Íslands Kirke fra dens Grundlæggelse til Reformationen*, (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1925), p.230; Piebenga, 'Godsvin Comhaer', p.202; Wetzig, 'Jón Gerrekssons Ende', p.101

<sup>47</sup> Einar Arnórsson, *Gottskalk biskup Nikulásson og Jón lögmaður Sigmundsson*, Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenzkra bókmennta 2.1.1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1953-4), pp.20-4

<sup>48</sup> *Diplomatarium Islandicum* vol. IV #705 (p.661)

<sup>49</sup> *Diplomatarium Norwegicum* vol. XVII #556-7 (pp.447-8)

<sup>50</sup> Piebenga, 'Godsvin Comhaer', p.203

<sup>51</sup> Marcellus was one of the most colourful individuals in the history of the Icelandic church, a disgraced German Franciscan turned conman and social climber. For his astonishing career see Björn Þorsteinsson, *Ævintýri Marcellusar Skálholtsbiskups* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1965).

<sup>52</sup> *Diplomatarium Nowegicum* vol. VIII #342, 343 (pp.368-73), vol. IV #923 (p.676-7)

<sup>53</sup> Storm, *Annaler*, p.371

<sup>54</sup> *Diplomatarium Islandicum* vol. V #153 (pp.166-8)

*eing en swmer med wmbode.*<sup>55</sup> It no doubt helped Ólafur's case that he was Gottskalk's nephew, and thus a relation of two previous Icelandic bishops.

Mathæus continued to claim Hólar in opposition to Ólafur, and even attempted to seize control of the diocese in 1458, but to avail.<sup>56</sup> Mathæus was to be the last of the Icelandic *páfabiskupar* and, with one exception,<sup>57</sup> all future Icelandic bishops until the Reformation would be, like Ólafur, Icelanders elected by the local clergy of their dioceses.

It will be obvious even from this cursory overview that the 'foreign bishops' were a very eclectic group, and that their relations with their diocesans reflected this fact. However, it is easy for one to overplay the importance of their particular personalities in shaping their interactions with the Icelanders, especially with controversial individuals like Jón Gerreksson, and to pay insufficient attention to the international political context and other systemic factors, the most obvious being the growth and development of the English trade from c.1410 onwards, coupled with the interlinked conflict between the papacy and the Council of Basel in the 1430s and 1440s. One aspect which has often been overlooked is the process whereby the Icelanders, or at least the Icelandic clergy, became gradually more assertive in their response to infringements on their interests by the foreign bishops, culminating in 1457 with the assumption by the Hólar clergy of the right to nominate their own bishops, and it would be an interesting exercise to compare their declaration, and the justifications they make within it for their unprecedented action, with previous letters of protest such as those read out at the Alþingi in 1387 and 1431, and even that sent to King Hákon V in 1319 to complain about a much earlier bishop, Auðunn rauði.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Diplomatarium Islandicum* vol. V #153 (p.167) – '[The] holy church has often come to great harm and considerable damage from those bishops such as to the church have been appointed, some with nothing but some with commissions.'

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. V #157 (pp.172-4), 821 (pp.594-5); Gunnar F. Guðmundsson, *Íslenskt samfélag*, p.128

<sup>57</sup> The exception was Jón Staffansson Krabbe, a canon of Nidaros consecrated by the archbishop in 1462/3. He may originally have been Danish. See Kolsrud, *Den norske*, p.268

<sup>58</sup> *Diplomatarium Norwegicum* vol. II #337 (pp.489-91)



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