

The Poor and the Vagrant

On medieval and early modern welfare for the poor in Iceland and its collapse

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Abstract

Poverty has always been a part of human history. However, because it is such a common and widespread phenomenon, it was often considered unnecessary to write about its various manifestations. Consequently, sources detailing the lives and living conditions of the poor in the Middle Ages and early modern period are scarce.

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Introduction

Poverty has always been a part of human history. However, because it is such a common and widespread phenomenon, it was often considered unnecessary to write about its various manifestations. Consequently, sources detailing the lives and living conditions of the poor in the Middle Ages and the early modern period are scarce. Of course, poverty can be defined in many different ways,¹ But in medieval Iceland, anyone who could not provide for themselves was considered poor: whether due to youth or frailty in old age, illness, or a lack of a means of subsistence, which, from the Middle Ages right through to the 20th century, was tied to land ownership. This article aims to demonstrate how care for the poor was organised in medieval Icelandic society, and in particular how the Church and society worked together to address this issue. Little attention has been paid to this topic in the past, apart from a brief overview by Tryggvi Þórhallsson on care for the poor and food distribution.² I would like to focus on the division of responsibilities between the secular institutions, i.e. between the farming families, the 'hreppur'³ (counties), and the place on church institutions. The relevant tax regulations and other options for financing welfare for the poor are examined. Finally, the collapse of this social system, which followed the introduction of the Reformation and King Christian III's Church Ordinance, will be described.

The sources are found mainly in the 'Diplomatarium Islandicum'⁴, but also in the bishop's sagas, hagiographies and law codes. Although they are rather sparse, they are more informative than those from the rest of Northern Europe. Scattered throughout the Icelandic sagas are accounts of welfare for the poor and the attitude of medieval Icelanders towards this issue. "I was given to Njáll when I was young; then I promised him that one fate should befall us both"⁵, said Bergþóra as the house above them was set alight, and she lay down under the bull's hide with her husband and grandson. This sentence has always been interpreted as a testament to Bergþóra's love for Njáll and her marital fidelity. However, it has a further and rather more pragmatic background. Who would provide for the imperious woman once Njáll and his sons had died? She would have become a beggar after their deaths.

Most sources concerning the treatment of the poor and the sick are written from the perspective of the rich and powerful, focusing on the aspects faced by those responsible for managing these issues organisationally. Clear descriptions of the living conditions of the common people are most readily found in the *Heilagra manna sögur* (Lives of the Saints) and *Jarteinasögur* (stories of miracles). These reveal a bitter struggle for survival, in which prayer and vows

to the saints were often the only recourse for the afflicted. Those most severely affected were those who had no home and no relatives, and who, being seriously ill, were forced to go from house to house begging.

A Christian outlook on life

According to the teachings of the Church, mercy is a fundamental element of Christianity. Such ideas must have been a novelty to people who were familiar only with the rules of tribal society. It probably took a long time for them to accept them. The defining element of the relationship between giver and receiver proved to be of great importance. Sermons show that Icelandic priests followed the theological trends of their time on the continent. In *Alia sermonis* (sic!), that is, in the second Christmas sermon, the address to the poor states:

“Now I advise you, O poor ones, to ask for clothes and food and to live on the alms of good people. Take heart, your suffering will be turned into joy. Do not grow weary of praying, for God is just and merciful in all his works. That is why he made you poor, so that you might endure this brief poverty with patience, but attain eternal joy thereafter. And that is why he made another rich, so that he might be healed of his sins when he gives you of his money.”⁶

In Iceland, the family in the broadest sense was the unit of production and the social institution responsible for distributing goods, until ecclesiastical institutions also began to take on this role. The goods to be distributed included food, clothing, footwear, shelter and other forms of protection that would otherwise have been provided by the family.

Knowledge of kinship was, for many reasons, the key to maintaining order in society, particularly with regard to inheritance, impediments to marriage, provision for the poor, the duty of vengeance, and allegiance.⁷ In the extensive and detailed ‘section on provision for the poor’ of the *Grágás*, which probably has its roots in pagan times, rules are laid down regarding the provision for the destitute. These are linked to kinship.⁸ The section on provision in the *Jónsbók* is much shorter than the corresponding section in the *Grágás*, and fewer examples are given.⁹

Christianisation marked the emergence of a new social factor in the history of the Nordic countries. The Church was able to assist people who had no clear right to support from their relatives. It formed a support system alongside the secular welfare provision for the poor, which was provided by peasant families

and the 'hreppur'¹⁰. Care for the poor was the responsibility of the dioceses, monasteries, churches with extensive landholdings and the hospice estates (see below).

The distribution of tithes and the regulation of taxes

The introduction of the tithe, which was decided in 1096, was a milestone, as it provided a financial foundation for an institution that, by its very nature, lay outside the norms of tribal society. The shared responsibility for the welfare of the poor was enshrined in law with the introduction of the tithe for the poor. This amounted to a quarter of the tithe, and its distribution was entrusted to the "hreppur." Since a "hreppur," as mentioned, represented an association of twenty Thing-attending farmers, it was the individual farms that carried out the distribution of the poor tithe. The tax rules seem to have been quite strict. Money donated to churches or for bridge construction or ferries remained untaxed.¹¹ "Five men best suited for the task shall distribute the tithe in the fall." A separate clause states that women were to pay the tithe just as men did,¹² a fairly good indication of women's participation in economic life in medieval Iceland. Regarding the poor tithe, it states: "It shall consist of woven woolen cloth, of 'vararfeldir'¹³, wool, sheepskins, foodstuffs, or livestock other than horses. The recipients shall receive their share before St. Martin's Day." Concerning the extent of the distribution, it was determined that those who were more in need should receive more.¹⁴

Laws and tradition determined, on the one hand, how much in goods—mostly food and shelter—each tithe payer had to contribute, and on the other hand, who was entitled to receive tithe goods and to what extent. The strict collection of tithes and the rule that the poor were allowed to keep the tithe from property valued at less than five hundred¹⁵ shows that welfare for the poor was a high priority, and to this reference was made when taxes needed to be justified¹⁶.

One problem with the legislation on tithes is that the provisions and the welfare of the poor date back a very long time—that is, to the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries— while the decisions that best illustrate them are relatively recent, that is, they have been handed down from the 15th and 16th centuries. However, the relative stagnation of society during these centuries certainly allows for conclusions to be drawn about earlier times.

There have always been disagreements over who should pay the tithe and how much. The story of Bishop Laurentius in Hólar (1324–1331) recounts a dispute between Bishop Auðun the Red (1313–1322) and the "lausamenn"¹⁷ in Skagafjörður, according to which the bishop wanted to effectively eliminate the

tithe exemption and levy taxes starting from the first hundred.¹⁸ Bishop Auðun came from Norway, and it is possible that tithing matters were handled differently there than in Iceland. In a judgment rendered in 1500 by Þorvarður Erlendsson, the “lögmaður” for the south and east, in the year 1500, it is described that the district leaders (“hreppstjórar”) sued the “búlausir menn”¹⁹ because they did not – as required – contribute to the care of the poor. The famine of recent years had reduced many to poverty.

The “lögmaður” (legal scholar/judge) referred to a provision stating that servants who possessed money were subject to the same tax obligations as other farmers. This is the same issue that concerned Bishop Auðun and the “lausamenn” in Skagafjörður. The “búlausir menn” (men without a farm or land), who owned five hundreds, were debt-free, and had no impoverished dependents or children to support, were obligated to pay one ell for every hundred up to ten hundreds, i.e., up to ten ells. Those who owned more were to pay food taxes (“svara manneldi”) like everyone else. If not, they had to buy their way out; otherwise, they were fined four marks. The text then refers to the regulation that the district administrators (“hreppstjórar”) were to distribute the provisioning of the poor equally among those liable for tithes, specifically one night’s lodging for every ten hundreds of property.²⁰ This presumably means that all who owned ten hundreds were obligated to provide a poor person with lodging and food for one night. How often and for how long a poor person received this benefit is not clear from this regulation. It is interesting that the “búlausir menn” were required to pay the poor tax. Apparently, these farmhands and servants without their own farms could be quite wealthy.

The judgment against Sturla Jónsson (Maura-Sturla) from 1540²¹ clearly shows that precise rules applied to meals and lodging on the farms. The judgment also shows how the distribution of the tithe took place in medieval Iceland, namely on the farms, since transporting food was difficult. It was simply easier for the needy to travel around themselves to receive the provisions. The farm owners were obligated to give the food saved by the servants during the usual fasting periods to the poor. The servants, who were each employed for a year, were obligated to fast for the poor.²² Sturla had unlawfully retained this food. He had also failed to hand over one-fifth of the livestock that he did not slaughter in the fall —“there were ten times ten in number”— as tax. These were likely lambs. Sturla was furthermore accused of many other things, e.g., that he had provided false information regarding the tithe payment or had failed to pay the bishop’s tithe, and that he had made his servants work on holidays. He was also found guilty of usury and failing to attend church as required. For this misconduct and such misdeeds, Sturla was sentenced to pay heavy fines.²³ The

judgment states that he had seriously violated law and tradition. This is one of the few sources that provides information about taxation on farms within the household community and about a functioning tax audit system.

The situation was particularly dire for itinerant beggars. This is revealed in a set of twelve regulations issued by the head of the district authority ('sýslumaður') Ari Jónsson (?-1550), which were enacted in 1544. All those in need in the district of Vaðlaþing who had had a resident father there were permitted to make four rounds of the district (several 'hreppar') per year in a specific order and to ask for food at every farm. Those who had no rights in this district were, under this regulation, only permitted to make two rounds.²⁴

The regulation draws a legal distinction between 'local' and 'foreign' beggars. Local beggars were entitled to food and lodging provided they followed the correct sequence. On the other hand, the peasants were afraid of foreign vagrants and wanted to get rid of them as quickly as possible. By way of comparison, a resolution of the Allthings from the year 1489 may be cited. It stipulates that peasants are not obliged to provide accommodation for or to employ such persons on²⁵ whom they had no information.

If someone ran out of funds, the first step was to investigate their relatives who were obliged by law to provide for them. If a relative objected, the district chief ('hreppstjóri') was obliged to determine whether such relative was financially able to do so. By virtue of their office, the 'hreppstjórar' must always have had a good overview of the financial circumstances of their parishioners.

No doubt such welfare arrangements for the poor often led to disputes between relatives and the 'Hreppsauthority'. A good example of this is the dispute over a sick woman in 1494. Arnór Finnsson of Ljárskógar in Laxárdal wanted Sturla Þórðarson to take care of his relative, Þóra Tumadóttir, who was disabled. Sturla became angry and, with a group of farmhands, took Þóra to the meadow at Ljárskógar. Arnór refused to take her in, and this led to an armed skirmish in which both parties sustained injuries.²⁶ This incident gave rise to a number of legal proceedings between the two relatives.

The regulations recorded in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* contain information on the procedures for treating the sick and the destitute. According to the laws, family ties and county of residence were decisive factors. On the other hand, there was a tendency to expel the very sick and those suffering from long-term illnesses, as the example of Hallotta Hákonardóttir from 1477 shows (see below). Another good example of the problems caused by a person of limited means can be found in the judgement from Vallarlaug in Skagafjörður dating

from 1562: a pair of orphaned siblings were to be placed with relatives. Steinþór, the boy, was assigned to Tumas Þorgilsson. However, Tumas initially refused to take him in, for the judgement notes:

“If the aforementioned Tumas claims to have no money to provide for the aforementioned destitute child, we shall require him to disclose his funds and have them assessed by sensible men, and to swear an oath that he possesses no more money than that which he has presented, and indeed rather less. If it transpires that he has no money to provide for this child, we oblige the aforementioned Tumas to secure lawful provision for the child by seeking out relatives who have the necessary funds.”²⁷

Tumas was therefore required to make a declaration of insolvency. Once the authorities had tracked down a relative whom they considered wealthy enough to support the indigent person, the latter was brought to him. From then on, the provider himself had to find another relative to take on the responsibility, if he wished to be relieved of this burden. Ultimately, Tumas succeeded in getting rid of the unwelcome relative when the boy turned 15 years old. Citing Section 1 of the Thingfahrt Act, a judgement from the year 1559 ruled that a person of no means must leave the ‘maintenance system’ if the person is 15 years old, in good health and able to work.²⁸

It may be that disputes arose in the municipalities of the country as to the extent to which poor people had the right to take in a relative entitled to support who did not reside in the provider’s ‘hreppur’. A decree dating from 1544 stipulates that anyone wishing to take in a relative by admitting them to the hreppur had to possess five hundred, be debt-free and also free from any other maintenance obligations.²⁹ These measures were presumably intended to prevent municipal maintenance obligations arising from poor people taking in distant relatives. The risk was that such people, together with their families and the non-local poor person they had taken in, would claim public poor relief.

These examples show that the laws governing the provision of aid to the poor were sometimes very strict, but at other times more generous; this was largely dependent on the size of the harvest and the general economic situation.

The laws on tithes and the traditional rules governing food donations and other services to the poor contributed to a functioning tax system and to tax control. The tax in the form of food was based in part on rules relating to fasting. People were aware of these rules and also exercised control over them. Because the tax was paid not so much in money but mainly in kind and in the form of overnight accommodation, the tithe for the poor had to be distributed among the farms. The rules according to which the welfare obligations were distributed among the farms are not known in their systematic entirety.

Hospice estates and provisions for care in wills, inventories and letters of vows

The oldest source in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* concerning social initiatives by private individuals in the Christian spirit is a donation by the married couple Hallfríður and Tanni dating from around 1100. In the relevant charter, they stipulated that half of the Bakki estate should be used as a hospice farm³⁰. Part of the income generated by the farm was to be used to provide sustenance for travellers and also to ferry them across the river on whose banks Bakki was situated. This is likely to be the river Hvítá in Borgarfjörður. This part of the farm included ten cows, sixty sheep and a new boat. The hospice farmer was to “provide for all people whom he deemed worthy and good”³¹ Tanni reserved the right, for as long as he lived, to supervise the farm. After his death, the bishop in Skálholt was to dispose of it as he saw fit, which meant that the hospice farm was to be separated from the main estate and remained a foundation under the supervision of the bishop. This was a novelty in Icelandic property law, as until then, land could only be owned by natural persons. In the 11th and 12th centuries, however, the Church, ecclesiastical institutions such as monasteries and humanitarian organisations such as hospice farms acquired legal capacity and became estate - and landowners. With the establishment of the hospice farms, a targeted economic foundation was laid for the care of the poor and other communal needs and services. In the late Middle Ages, the hospice farms owned an estimated 1.2 per cent of the country’s land.³²

Hallfríður and Tanni continued to support church institutions generously. They donated half of the Hraun farm to the church that was built on the farm. In addition, they donated livestock, cash and liturgical paraphernalia. This endowment to the church constituted a separate legal entity. The inventory list states that a priest and a deacon were to be provided for there. A female ward was also to be supported. If the church had no deacon, a male ward was to be provided for in his place. This marked the beginning of the church’s welfare work for the poor, which was to develop further later on. The tenant was to ‘provide for every person whom he “deemed good and worthy of a night’s lodging and food.”’³³ The same source states that the bishop of Skálholt, Þorlákur Runólfsson (1118–1133), granted the tithe from 14 farms to this church, presumably to strengthen the economic basis of poor relief and other services provided here. Provisions for the care of the poor also frequently appear in the church inventories.

In Keldunúpur there was a hospice farm with ‘all its property and benefits’ dedicated to Christ and the Apostle Peter. It comprised forty sheep and a one-year-old castrated ram, fourteen “öre” worth of six ells, one bushel of grain or half a “vætt” of food. A destitute female person, ‘who can dress and undress

herself', was to live on this hospice farm. On Maundy Thursday or on St Peter's Day, half a mark of woven woollen cloth was to be paid.³⁴ Added to this was the priest's stipend. A meal for a man was to be served on the first day of Christmas, on Easter Sunday and on Whit Sunday.³⁵

"The milk from all the livestock is to be distributed on St Peter's Day in the morning. Every spring, a lamb is to be marked, and St Peter is to protect it; it is then to be given away in the autumn when it returns from the common land. There, [in addition], poor people and those who are travelling on business are to be fed."³⁶

It is clear that a hospice tenant could hardly have become wealthy from running the business. The hospice farms rarely yielded much, and the tax and supply obligations were overwhelming. However, one can deduce from this letter how the financing of poor relief was conceived and carried out. The hospice farm and its livestock formed the economic basis not only for the tenant and his family, but also for providing for the poor and feeding travellers. The income from a single farm could scarcely have covered all the obligations mentioned above, particularly when travellers arrived frequently. It is reasonable to assume that additional financial support was provided, even if this is not mentioned in the available sources.

The *Diplomatarium Islandicum* contains a considerable number of foundation charters for hospice estates with content similar to that of the document quoted above. Often, the founder stipulated that the poor person had to come from his own clan. There is also evidence that poor people were granted a hospice farm as a means of subsistence for themselves and their families.³⁷ The parish warden or overseer of a particular church estate was to determine the use of the hospice farm. Land ownership was the mainstay of the economy, and it is likely that provisions for the care of the poor were frequently attached to these farms. In a letter dated 1371, Halldóra Þorvaldsdóttir sets out her sustenance obligation to Helgafell Abbey, where she intended to spend her twilight years as "provent woman"³⁸. She had provided, as payment for her maintenance, 4 farms, each worth 10 cows. Attached to these farms were provisions regarding the admission of the poor, which the monastery council subsequently demanded be amended. Halldóra was forced to revoke these provisions³⁹.

Similar provisions regarding the care of the poor can also be found in the wills of wealthy individuals. Loftur Guttormsson the Rich bequeathed his estate to his sons and to a female relative, and laid down strict provisions regarding the care of the poor amongst his relatives. The following is recorded:

“I hereby instruct Ormur, Skúli and Sumarliði to always provide for a poor person from the Skarðsverja clan—whomever is most in need—in Staðarholt, Garpsdal and Vatnshorn. The person who inherits this estate shall provide for the poor. I command all my lawful heirs that they shall always provide for a person in need at all the main farms, namely in Skarð, Flatey and Galtartungu. These persons shall be from the Skarðs clan. One poor person from the Möðruvellir clan shall be taken in at Möðruvellir, Lögmannshlíð, Ásgarðsbrekku, Sjárvarborg, Marstöðum and Ásgeirsá. Another pauper from the clan of Páll Þorvarðarson is to be taken in at Eiðar, Njarðvík and Ketilsstaðir, and a pauper from the clan of the farmer Gísli is to be taken in at Mörk and Dalur beneath Eyjafjöll. I order that each of them be allotted eight ells of woven woollen cloth every twelve months. I command my lawful heirs, as named in my will, to always observe and comply with the provisions contained in my will.”⁴⁰

It is possible that such bequests were a form of concession towards distant relatives who, under the law, were not entitled to inherit but who were close to Loftur. In this way, the consequences of the rigid inheritance rules could be mitigated. Such measures may also have been a reward from the chieftain to his follower for long-standing friendship and loyalty. Care and generosity were also part of the identity of the medieval chieftain.⁴¹

It is reasonable to assume that care for the poor took place more frequently than is recorded in the sources. The most extensive records concerning care for the poor and the hospice estates come from the district of Skaftafellssýsla; this is undoubtedly due to chance. The hospice estates were probably just as widespread in other parts of the country as they were there. Provisions regarding obligations to provide for the poor, both over the long term and on a one-off basis on major feast days, are found particularly in inventories and deeds of foundation relating to churches and hospice farms.⁴² A good example of temporary assistance to the poor is provided by the inventory of the church at Spákonufell. It contains the following:

“A poor woman, whom the person living there [in the hospice courtyard] is to take in, at his discretion, shall present herself at St Þorlák’s before Christmas (23 December) and shall remain there over the festive period; a second time on Maundy Thursday, to remain there during Holy Week; a third time at Pentecost and during the week of Pentecost.”⁴³

There are examples of wealthy people funding the churches’ care for the poor on the condition that their relatives would benefit from the same care.⁴⁴ In another case, a man purchased a place and care for a poor person.⁴⁵ The churches’ inventories reveal provisions regarding the donation of essential goods, in particular the tithe from whales to the poor. These inventories show that churches frequently held the right to a beached whale, the right to hunt

seals, the right to collect eggs and other fishing and hunting rights. They also often owned livestock. Payments to churches usually consisted of food and hides for shoes.⁴⁶ All of this could be put to good use in providing for the poor.

From Ás in the parish of Holt, for example, there is a record of St Olaf's cow, whose milk belonged to the poor.⁴⁷ It was also customary to set aside a fifth of the game or fish caught on a feast day for the poor.⁴⁸ According to inventories and similar sources, food and other essential items were traditionally distributed on major church feast days, such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, on St Michael's Day and on the feasts of the Apostles — the latter in particular if the church in question was consecrated to one of the Apostles. The inventories even contain examples showing that repairs to bridges and ferries were also to be financed from church assets.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it can be assumed that there were other forms of welfare for the poor, even if the sources do not explicitly mention them.

The letters of vows printed in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* show that people promised to attend more church services, fast more strictly and make larger contributions to charity for the poor if they wished to be reconciled with the Almighty. In one such letter from Eyjafjörður dated 1477, the signatories promise to donate according to their means, though the farmers were to give no less than one ell. Men without a farm or land ('búlausir menn'), but who possessed more than 10 hundreds, were to donate a 'sheared sheep's skin', whilst those possessing five hundreds were to donate a calfskin. These alms were to go to a person of no means who 'lies in the house'. This probably refers to a sick person who was unable to wander between farms and could therefore only remain on one and the same farm. On the feast day of Blessed Guðmundur, each member of the household staff was to be given 2 1/2 marks of butter or an equivalent meal.⁵⁰ This source assumes that food was distributed on the farms on certain church feast days. A meal is defined as 2½ marks of butter or other food of equivalent value.⁵¹

In the *Biskupa sögur* (Bishops' Sagas) and *Heilagra manna sögur* (Saints' Sagas), one can discern a tradition relating to vows that benefited the poor and also the celebration of divine service. In "Sögu Þorláks biskups hinna elztu" there is mention of vows made to Saint Þorlákur. A man named Þorbjörn in Grindavík vowed to provide for five poor people, to sing the Psalter five times and to read the oration 'Deus, qui populo tuo' in honour of God.⁵² Another vow is mentioned in the same source: A man in need promised to lend the bishop's seat at Skálholt a horse and to donate a beam to the church; the first seal caught in the net was to be distributed amongst the poor.⁵³ It was often vowed to distribute a meal to the poor at specific intervals; in addition, there was a promise to donate wax and woven woollen cloth to a particular church.

The Bishops' Care for the Poor

Since, under canon law, bishops were obliged to care for the poor, there must always have been a large number of poor people at the two Icelandic bishoprics. In "Hungrvaka" it is recounted that Bishop Ísleifur (in office 1056–1080) 'derived no financial benefit from his bishopric, for the income was meagre and there were always many guests; managing the estate proved difficult.'⁵⁴ With the introduction of the tithe, the situation improved, for a quarter of the tithe, 'which had to be paid in woven woollen cloth, in hides, "vararfeldir"⁵⁵, in lambskins, in gold or in burnished silver', went to the bishoprics.⁵⁶ The Bishop's tithe had to be paid by Thursday of the fourth week of summer. In accordance with the above-mentioned rules regarding the bishops' duty of care towards the poor, the Bishop's tithe must also have been used for the welfare of the episcopal sees.

Together with Bishop Þorlákur Runólfsson in Skálholt (1118–1133), the priest Tjörvi Böðvarsson lived, 'a great man,' as noted in the "Hungrvaka". He was constantly at work: either he sang the Psalter, or taught, wrote, read, or he attended to 'the affairs of the people who came to him and sought his counsel.' He was generous to the poor, but frugal in his dealings with the farmers. He never, however, spared money for necessary and useful work.⁵⁷ Tjörvi was probably the almoner of the bishopric at Skálholt. He apparently discharged his duties so carefully that he was immortalised in the "Hungrvaka".

Of the later successor of Bishop Þorlákur Runólfsson in Skálholt, Bishop Klængur Þorsteinsson (in office 1152–1176), it is said that 'he was noble-minded and generous towards his friends and charitable and liberal towards poor people.'⁵⁸ Klængur was evidently a chieftain, as he is portrayed in the sagas; he maintained his kinship and friendship ties, thereby increasing his social and political influence. The episcopal household required many resources, for there was much servitude at the bishop's seat, and hospitality was costly. Klængur had a church built, thereby revitalising the economy of the diocese. His contemporaries were so impressed by his dynamism that the author of the "Hungrvaka" suggests his generosity will be remembered for as long as Iceland is inhabited. This leads to the conclusion that during Bishop Klængur's tenure, the Skálholt bishopric had become an economic driving force and an important employer. His successor, Þorlákur Þórhallsson (bishop 1178–1193), also known as Saint Þorlákur, endeavoured to further strengthen the economic foundation of the Skálholt bishopric and appointed capable overseers, 'so that he himself could be freed from these duties.'⁵⁹ He took his role as father of the poor very seriously, and in his Vita it is reported:

“He had a deep love for the poor; he gave clothes to those who were cold and fed the hungry. It was clear that he rarely forgot that on Judgement Day he would have to give an account and, as a shepherd, be held accountable for how the poor had been treated in this life.”⁶⁰

The title ‘Father of the Poor’ had already become established by the 12th century, and in the eyes of the Icelanders, caring for the poor had become an integral part of the bishop’s office. This title was subsequently also bestowed upon Saint Jón Ögmundsson, the Bishop of Hólar (in office 1106–1121). It is reported of him that:

“He was a true father to all the poor. He comforted widows and orphans, and no one came to him so weighed down by grief that he could not comfort them in one way or another.”⁶¹

Although the *Biskupa sögur* contain many of the usual tropes found in hagiographies, one can certainly place credence in their description of the nature of the episcopal office and the measures taken to resolve the problems faced by the poor. And it is certain that the latter two bishops, owing to their love for the poor and their business acumen, became so famous that they were raised to the rank of the Blessed.

The love shown by Bishop Guðmundur Arason of Hólar (in office 1203–1237), who was given the epithet ‘the Good’ for the poor and defenceless, stood in no proportion to the material wealth at his disposal. According to his *vita*, he identified so strongly with his poor followers that he came into conflict with his powerful relatives in Skagafjörður on their behalf. This ended in disaster. It appears that Guðmundur possessed neither economic foresight nor diplomatic skill in dealing with the wealthy and tax-paying members of society. He may have been under the spiritual influence of the mendicant orders, which were establishing themselves in the cities of the continent at that time. His *vita* mentions in passing how food was distributed. Bishop Guðmundur wanted to provide the poor with food three times a day, whilst his close relative Kolbeinn, who was in charge of the guesthouse, had food distributed only once a day. This frugality led to a dispute between the two ⁶². Owing to Bishop Guðmundur’s charitable work, a large crowd had gathered in Hólar, and the farmers feared violence from these people should the food run out. If it had been Guðmundur’s intention to convert the bishop’s seat at Hólar into a hospital for the poor, he did not succeed. His followers were driven out of Hólar, and we know nothing of their subsequent fate.

From a dispute between Bishop Auðun the Red and the priest Snjólfur in Grenjaðarstaður, it may be concluded that the bishops wished to have a say in the provision of support for priests of limited means. The facts of the matter

were as follows: Snjólfur refused to take in a priest whom the bishop had assigned to him. The bishop then had it confirmed by oath that Grenjaðarstaður was obliged to employ seven priests.⁶³ However, the priest Snjólfur must have had sound arguments in his favour, for there was hardly enough work in Grenjaðarstaður to keep so many priests employed. The dispute escalated, and the bishop excommunicated Snjólfur. Snjólfur subsequently fled to Norway. In the account of Bishop Laurentíus Kálfsson of Hólar (in office 1324–1331), the following is reported regarding the organisation of welfare for the poor:

“This should not be forgotten, but should be made known to good people — just how many and how generous the alms he [Laurentius] had distributed from the bishop’s estate in Hólar whilst he was bishop. All the fines that came into the provostry, he gave away to the poor, to those who needed it most, especially to those who were bedridden, to lepers, to the blind and to those who were gravely ill. To run the provostry, he appointed priests, first Páll Þorsteinsson, but then Björn Ófeigsson. The bishop himself determined their pay for their effort. Many poor people got help and everyone contributed their small share willingly. He ordered that twelve beggars should live in Hólar and on the episcopal estates. They were provided with clothing and food. During Lent, five poor people were taken into the house. They stayed until after Easter. On St Michael’s Day in autumn, the bishop’s steward was to measure out twenty hundred yards of woven woollen cloth. This was to be given to the poor for the winter until after Whitsun. The almsmaster was to distribute this among the poor, namely to those he considered most in need, or to those whom the bishop sent to him. A virtuous man, Þorsteinn Þorleifsson, was appointed to this task. He had the entire revenue, which was paid annually to the bishop’s seat in the form of woven woollen cloth, carried into his chambers and distributed amongst the poor.”⁶⁴

Bishop Laurentíus, however, did not forget his staff and his parishioners. His Vita recounts the following:

“He always organised a lavish Christmas celebration for his priests and the ecclesiastical dignitaries, provent people, the stewards and the housekeeper, as well as for all the servants, so that everyone might have their fill of joy.”⁶⁵

Even though one may assume that the author of the Vita wished to present his hero in the best possible light, one may nevertheless assume that the bishop’s conduct was in keeping with the expectations of the time. Furthermore, it should be noted at this point that Lárentíus saga is not a hagiography. The

author, Einar Hafliðason, was a contemporary of Bishop Laurentíus and was in his service. Whilst writing his biography, he had access to the episcopal archive in Hólar.⁶⁶

At the bishoprics, but also in the monasteries, a master of alms was responsible for poor guests and wandering beggars, as was also the custom on the continent. On major feast days, food, livestock and hides for shoes were distributed amongst the poor. Such measures must have eased the burden on peasant families, who were also required to look after the poor and the vagrants. At the feasts of Bishops Guðmundur the Good and Jón Ögmundsson, Bishop Jón Arason (in office 1524–1550) also had twenty hundreds distributed. In doing so, he would likely have drawn on the old tradition. As Bishop Jón awaited his execution, he sent a message to Hólar instructing his stewards to distribute 60 cow-values amongst the poor. That amounted to 60 ‘vættir’ of butter (approx. 2,040 kg). 1,200 fish, 18 ‘fat cones’, 8 bolts of woven woollen cloth and 10 hides.⁶⁷ It is likely that similar quantities of food and clothing were distributed at the bishop’s seat in Skálholt, as the bishop there, Ögmundur Pálsson (in office 1521–1540), was said to have been “remarkably generous with money and food”⁶⁸.

Caring for elderly and impoverished priests was clearly right at the top of the church leadership’s list of priorities. This is recounted in the story of St Laurentíus. Bishop Laurentíus, who was socially committed, had a hospice for priests built at Kvíabekk so that elderly and sick priests would not have to take up the beggar’s staff. The hospice’s financial resources were quite substantial. For instance, every priest in the diocese was obliged to pay 3½ marks to the hospice. Furthermore, the farmers in Ólafsfjörður and Fljót were obliged, for all time, to rear fifty lambs for the hospice. In addition, Laurentius made fines available⁶⁹. A second hospice was located in Gaulverjabær in Flói.⁷⁰

The extent to which care for the poor was at the heart of episcopal ministry can be seen from the miracles attributed to deceased bishops. The Blessed Bishop Þorlákur is said to have rescued a woman from a desperate situation. At the same time, we learn of the plight of a seriously ill beggar woman. In the “Saga Þorláks biskups hin ýngsta”, it is described that a poor woman named Álfheiður fell ill with a leg ailment, leaving her unable to work:

“For a while, she trudged from house to house. The damp and having to cross streams made her wound even worse ...Finally, she lay down at the farm Þorvaldsstaðir, and she seemed doomed to die from hunger, leg wounds and shortness of breath, for she had been moving on all fours between the farms for a long time, moaning and groaning.”⁷¹

On the feast day of Saint Þorlákur, she could no longer cope. As the country was in a state of distress and many were dying, no one was willing to help her. Evidently, the farmers were unable to take in a helpless, sick woman. In this hagiographic tale, the blessed Bishop Þorlákur appeared and rescued Álfheiður from her plight. In this context, it is entirely irrelevant whether Álfheiður was a historical figure, for the story also describes, in general terms, the ordeal of a sick woman in the Middle Ages who was not able to help herself.

The role of the bishop's estates in providing supplementary assistance to families is clearly illustrated by the example of Hallotta from the year 1477. She lived on a farm in Húnaþing and was in a state of complete physical exhaustion. Björn, the farmer, chose to transport the sick woman to the farm Flugumýri in Skagafjörður, which belonged to the bishop's seat at Hólar. There he left her. The administrators of the diocese at Hólar regarded this as a breach of church law. Björn was ordered to pay for the woman's stay at Flugumýri and, on top of that, to make amends for his insolence. He was obliged to transport Hallotta back to Húnaþing⁷². The fact that the farmer Björn had transported the sick woman to an episcopal estate is only plausible if the Church and its institutions generally served as a last resort when it came to the care of the chronically ill, which was beyond the means of average households. There were certainly rules in place for such cases, which farmer Björn had clearly failed to observe. It may well be that he was wealthy enough and his obligations to care for Hallotta were too clear-cut for the cathedral church in Hólar to grant him any support.

A further example of how deeply the leaders of medieval society were committed to fulfilling their charitable duties towards the poor and the sick is provided by the foundation charter of the hospices at All Saints' Church and St Catherine's Church in Vogsbotn, Bergen, Norway, dating from 1276. King Magnús Hákonarson (reigned 1263-1280), Bishop Áskatinn, Abbot Eiríkur of Munklífi and the canons of Christ Church established the following generous initiative: at All Saints' Church, thirty beds were to be provided for men, and at St Catherine's Church, twenty beds for women at St Catherine's Church. It was strictly forbidden to admit paying patients; these hospitals were evidently intended for the common people. Furthermore, this document contains precise provisions regarding the care of the sick, the salaries and remuneration of the hospice clergy, and the conduct of the staff.⁷³ The statute attests to the tradition that had been upheld in the Norwegian state and the Archdiocese of Nidaros. Kings and bishops took the initiative in the fields of care for the poor and social welfare. This situation was also significant for Iceland and imposed obligations on wealthier individuals, particularly leading clergy.

Icelandic sources make no mention of hospitals for the common people, with the exception of the hospital established on the initiative of Bishop Ögmundur in Skálholt. In 1525, this bishop brought the German physician Lazarus Mattheusson to Iceland. He made the farm Skáney available to him, where he was to treat the sick for a small fee. The physician was to provide the medicines himself. As syphilis was rampant in Iceland at that time, Bishop Ögmundur evidently regarded it as his duty to combat the disease and establish a hospital.⁷⁴ It is unlikely that Lazarus's farm at Skáney could have financed the hospital; there must have been other sources of income or subsidies.

The social commitment of the monasteries

Icelandic monasteries had a wide range of responsibilities, particularly in the social and economic spheres. Abbots and abbesses belonged to the country's ruling class and administered extensive landholdings. Within the monastery, they exercised episcopal disciplinary authority. Unfortunately, the monastic archives in Iceland are poorly preserved,⁷⁵ and one must therefore attempt, with all due caution, to infer the contribution of the Icelandic monasteries on the basis of the rules and traditions of charity on the continent.

By the end of the Middle Ages, there were nine monasteries in Iceland: seven communities of monks and two of nuns. However, the number of monastics was rather low in the late Middle Ages. A register compiled by Superintendent Gizur Einarsson in Skálholt in 1542 states that there were eighteen monks and seven nuns in the entire diocese of Skálholt.⁷⁶

The monastic inhabitants who attained higher orders of holy orders and offices came from wealthy and influen

tial families. It is reasonable to assume that, in addition to monks and nuns, a number of lay brothers and lay sisters also lived in the Icelandic monasteries.⁷⁷ Some of the Icelandic monasteries were rich in land holdings; for example, the Helgafell monastery owned, at the time of the Reformation, 120 farms, the monastery at Viðey 95, the monastery at Þykkvibær 55, the one at Skriða 40, the one at Möðruvellir 55, the one at Munkaþverá 61 and the monastery at Þingeyrar 74 farms. The two nunneries were significantly less wealthy: the nunnery at Reynistaður owned 41 farms at the time of the Reformation, and the nunnery at Kirkjubær 39 farms.⁷⁸ In total, the monasteries' land holdings amounted to 13 per cent of all land in Iceland.⁷⁹ It is reasonable to assume that the proceeds were not used solely to support a few monks and nuns and their respective staff. Furthermore, levies were usually paid in foodstuffs that did not keep for long; they had to be either sold or distributed.

The monastery records indicate that teaching also took place there, as there are corresponding contracts between the monastery administration and the parents or guardians of children or young people.⁸⁰ In the Icelandic monasteries, crafts were practised, such as weaving the tapestry and the production of books.⁸¹ It is obvious that, given the division of labour practised there, the labour of physically frail people – who in a different social context would have been a burden – could also be utilised. On occasion, the monasteries were able to provide shelter to those in need and alleviate the temporary hardship of their clients. In Jón Gizurarson's "Ritgjörð", it is recounted that Abbot Sigvarður in Þykkvabær took in Gizur Einarsson – who later became superintendent at Skálholt (1540/42–1548), when no one else was willing to grant him shelter.⁸² Gizur's aunt, Abbess Halldóra of Kirkjubær, took in a woman at her convent whose husband had severely beaten her. Her nephew, the superintendent, subsequently admonished her to send the woman back home, as domestic violence was not grounds for divorce.⁸³ However, there was a tradition and general recognition of church asylum for the persecuted. In this case, Abbess Halldóra relied on this, which stands as the sole example of the role of Icelandic nunneries as a refuge for women.

If one takes as a starting point the European monastic tradition of charity towards the poor, it is reasonable to assume that poor people were also provided for in the Icelandic monasteries. A letter written in Low German, which merchants, citizens and captains in Hamburg addressed to the King of Denmark in 1540, it is mentioned that 40 poor people were fed daily at the monastery on Viðey.⁸⁴ These 40 poor people constitute a considerable group, even if this figure may also have included those who had already paid for their welfare. At the French monastery of Cluny, 72 poor people were fed daily. In addition, there were itinerant beggars.⁸⁵ It is reasonable to assume that the monastery at Viðey's generous contribution to the care of the poor was based on a tradition, and that the other monasteries provided care for the poor on a similar scale in accordance with their means, even if the sources are silent on this matter.

In the Reformation Church Ordinance of 1537, members of monastic orders – and thus monasteries themselves – are dealt with indirectly and only briefly. In the wake of the Reformation, monastic estates passed to the king. He ceded these estates to his followers in return for a small fee. The money generated did not find its way back into society to the same extent as before, but served as a financial basis for the king's loyal friends and aides. Interestingly, the dissolution of the monasteries is not mentioned; instead, the monks and nuns were permitted to leave their monasteries if monastic life conflicted with their conscience. It can be inferred from the text that the monks and nuns were regarded as welfare cases who would need to be provided for if they wished to

remain in their monasteries, which is only to be expected given the transfer of their property to the king. The nuns are admonished to 'be obedient to their prioress, warden and abbess', and they are warned against travelling about the country, as well as against drunkenness or improper association with men. Should they wish to leave their convent, they were free to do so provided their livelihood was secured, and they were permitted to marry with the consent of their male relatives or friends.⁸⁶ This probably also refers to mendicant monks and nuns, against whom the Reformers took a firm stand. As the mendicant orders never managed to gain a foothold in Iceland, these articles of the Church Ordinance applied to a monastic life that was of an entirely different nature and which had played a far greater and more significant role in Icelandic society than the Church Ordinance of Christian III implied.

Reformation and the Reorganisation of Royal Power

The manorial authority of the bishoprics and their economic interests, which extended as far as Norway, had secured the Icelandic bishops economic leadership in the country. In Iceland, the position of the last Catholic bishops was in many respects comparable to that of the Catholic princes of the Church in Germany.⁸⁷ The political paradigm shift that took place in Denmark in 1537 when Christian III came to power had far-reaching consequences for Iceland in the decades that followed. At that time, a constitutional change took place towards a centralised state, which also fundamentally transformed the country's social welfare system and economy. Christian III's Church Ordinance became the basis for a church constitution that eroded the economic and political foundations of the power held by the Icelandic bishops.⁸⁸ The role and remit of the Lutheran superintendents were defined quite differently from those of their Catholic predecessors. They were not, to the same extent, the 'fathers of the poor', but rather, in accordance with the meaning of the word 'superintendent', overseers. The portion of the tithe that traditionally belonged to the bishops was claimed and collected by the king. The Church Ordinance was a law that Christian III unilaterally enforced by military might, even though the preface states that the king had consulted many 'assistants'.⁸⁹ Together with the Recess of 1536, the Church Ordinance is the constitution that for a long time shaped the Reformed Danish state.⁹⁰

The Reformers on the continent had a number of criticisms of the Catholic system of poor relief, including the view that, by extolling poverty and beggars, it encouraged laziness and idleness. Furthermore, there was much talk of theft and corruption in the Church's almshouses. The Reformers believed that the funds available for poor relief were sufficient; the problem, they argued, was that no distinction was made between the genuinely poor and those who were

able to work. It was also a thorn in their side that laypeople were barred from managing and running charitable institutions.⁹¹ The cornerstone of reformed poor relief was the municipal authorities. The Church Ordinance states the following regarding the organisation of poor relief:

“Therefore, every bishop shall, within his diocese, together with our vassals, the provosts, preachers and the council of each town, establish a general alms box for the poor, into which shall be collected all that Christian people donate in the name of God, whether bequests or synod funds, collections on feast days, gifts from associations or guilds, funeral provisions and all property bequeathed to the poor. Unclaimed property shall also go to the poor. The preachers should exhort the people to generosity, so that they may give alms to the poor, which they formerly used to donate for good causes, but under a false and misleading belief—for Masses, monks’, for letters of indulgence, pilgrimages and for the souls of the dead, as well as for many other such heresies.”⁹²

The superintendent was advised, in consultation with the feudal lord, the provost and the parish priests, to entrust the administration to a number of virtuous dignitaries who were to act as ‘guardians, trustees and servants of the poor’. A separate chapter deals with the hospitals, the establishment and operation of which were regarded as a key contribution to alleviating the plight of the poor. At the beginning of the chapter, the King’s will is reaffirmed that the properties which had been donated for the care of the poor should be used for their original purpose. This statement suggests that, previously, greedy individuals had unlawfully appropriated such endowments, against which the Church, even on the mainland, had repeatedly had to defend itself.

It is then stipulated that such institutions should appoint board members who “collect the alms and render a sound account”. The hospital’s staff were to receive their wages from the alms box mentioned above. Supervision of the hospital’s operations lay in the hands of the parish priest. One section describes the hospital’s facilities as follows:

“Both the room and the bedding, the tableware—for example, bowls and plates—and everything else that is needed there should be carefully provided. These are allocated to the respective patients according to their illness, particularly because it is feared that the illnesses are of such a nature that they are transmitted from one person to another. Therefore, it must not be allowed for many to be infected with the same disease through contact with a few. Doctors in the towns shall do their utmost to cure the sick, insofar as a cure is possible, for example those who are

suffering from syphilis. For this labour, the doctors shall receive their salary.”⁹³

When one considers the previous regulations governing the organisation of poverty relief and healthcare in Iceland, this legislation is nothing short of forward-thinking; however, it was hardly feasible in the Icelandic context of the 16th century. Christian III’s ecclesiastical ordinance was tailored to municipal communities,⁹⁴ where money had become established as a means of payment. This system was impracticable in Iceland, as there were not even the beginnings of towns there and minted coins were rare. Nevertheless, the country’s leading figures made efforts to implement the new laws. In the so-called Bessastaðar Agreement of 1555, they proposed establishing four almshouses, one in each district of the country, but met with little response from the royal administration. In 1556, a letter arrived from the King, from which the following passage is taken:

“It is His Majesty’s view that no hospitals should be established in Iceland as long as the poor in the country wander about and seek their food wherever they can best find it ...”⁹⁵

It can be inferred from this succinct statement that the Danish authorities considered the organisation of poor relief in Iceland to be so satisfactory that they saw no pressing need to implement the relevant provisions of the Church Ordinance, especially as the construction and running of the almshouses would have cost money that the authorities were unwilling to set aside for social purposes. Other areas of responsibility, such as the administration of justice, ranked higher on the list of priorities. Icelandic farming families were the institutions that ensured the provision of poor relief even after the Reformation and well into the 20th century, through the direct provision of the poor tithe.

A letter from twelve clergymen in the Diocese of Hólar shows that as early as the tenure of Ólafur Hjaltason (1552–1569), a crisis had arisen at the bishop’s seat in Hólar when, during the famine of 1557, the poor flocked there in droves in the hope of finding relief from their hardship. It reads:

“At his Stift (administrative unit corresponding to the Hólar-bischofprici) in the North, there is great hardship and cold, both in agriculture and in fishing. People are nearly dying of hunger and poverty. Even the livestock are perishing in the frost and snow. Poor people are dying for lack of clothing, so that he [Ólafur] can barely keep the episcopal see going.”⁹⁶

The clergy proposed that the superintendent should be permitted to retain the traditional bishop’s tithe and to use and distribute it in accordance with ancient custom and the needs of the country.”⁹⁷ By this time, the bishop’s tithe had

already been assigned to the king, and little help was to be expected from the bishoprics. The source shows that Icelandic life had taken on a new dimension; and this was linked to the complete inability of the church leaders to alleviate an acute famine, as the church's economic system and social welfare system had come to a standstill. There are numerous decisions from the late 16th century taken by county councillors ('sýslumenn') which show that the problem of poverty completely overwhelmed both the peasants and the secular authorities.⁹⁸

Concluding Remarks

This study has shown how Iceland dealt with the pervasive problem of poverty during the 500 years of Catholic rule. A multi-tiered social safety net developed, with the family of the poor at its forefront. Next came the local community, followed by the Church as the final resort should both fail. The collapse of poor relief following the Reformation demonstrates that the Church had previously played a significant role in this system, as the capacity of the family and the local community was, after all, limited. This remains true even if one attributes the increase in poverty during the 16th century to a deterioration in the weather. This deterioration in the climate, combined with the simultaneous overhaul of poor relief under Christian III's Church Ordinance of 1537, ultimately led to the collapse of the poor relief system in Iceland. The country's largest economic force, the Church, was stripped of its economic function. The king, who assumed this economic power, failed to fill the resulting gap. The separation of poor relief from the Christian ethos and the associated reward in the afterlife, through the assignment of this task to the secular authorities, also led to a loss of motivation among the wealthy and a decline in personal willingness to help.

The plight of the poor is usually a fairly reliable indicator of the economic situation of society. The numerous court cases concerning beggars and their activities in the years following the Reformation bear witness to the fact that society was overwhelmed by the task of caring for the poor. As attempts to develop new economic and social structures failed, manorialism remained, by and large, the dominant economic system well into the 20th century.⁹⁹ Only a small proportion of tax revenue benefited the Icelandic welfare system in the form of the poor tithe, whilst a deteriorating climate, unfavourable trading conditions and low productivity caused poverty to increase, a problem that plagued Icelandic society well into the 20th century. As a result of the Reformation, Icelanders did indeed gain better access to the Bible and were able to grasp the theoretical foundations to study church doctrine. At the same time, however, the economic foundations necessary for putting the biblical

commandments on caring for the poor into practice had been shattered. It can be argued, with some justification, that the Icelanders were forced to retain only orthodoxy, rather than orthopraxy.

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Footnotes

1. See Karl Bosl, *Das Problem der Armut in der hochmittelalterlichen Gesellschaft*, (Sitzungsberichte der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist Klasse p. 294/5) (Wien, 1974), *passim*. 1 ↵
2. Tryggvi Þórhallsson, “Ómagahald, matgjafir o. fl.” In: *Skírnir* 110 (Reykjavík 1936) pp. 123-132. Recently, a doctoral thesis on this subject was published: Wolfgang Gerhold, *Armut und Armenfürsorge im mittelalterlichen Island* (Heidelberg, 2002). The author draws on philological and legal traditions and relies primarily on earlier German research, but does not take ecclesiastical influences into account. 2 ↵
3. An association of 20 Thing-attending farmers who were wealthy enough to pay the Thing-going tax. They were responsible for organising welfare for the poor in their ‘hreppur’, Gunnar Karlsson et al., *Grágás. Lagasafn íslenska þjóðveldisins* (Reykjavík 1997), p. 180; Andreas Heusler, „Isländisches Recht: Die Graugans“ (Weimar 1937) XIII, No. 234, p. 297. For a more detailed definition of the term “hreppur”, see Gerhold, *Armut und Armenfürsorge*, p.136. 3 ↵
4. *Diplomatarium Islandicum: Íslenskt fornbréfasafn, sem hefur inni að halda bréf og gjörninga, dóma og máldaga og aðrar skrár, er snerta Ísland og íslenzka menn I-XVI* (Kaupmannahöfn and Reykjavík 1857–1970), (hereinafter cited as DI) 4 ↵
5. Felix Niedner et al., eds., *Die Geschichte vom weisen Njal, Thule: Altnordische Dichtung und Prosa IV* (Düsseldorf and Cologne, 1963), p. 278. 5 ↵
6. Sigurbjörn Einarsson et al. (eds.), *Íslensk Hómilíubók. Fornar stólræður* (Reykjavík 1993), p. 76. 6 ↵
7. Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Women and Vikings: The Status of the Sexes in Iceland in the 12th and 13th Centuries* (Reykjavík, 1995), pp. 43–55. 7 ↵
8. Gunnar Karlsson et al., eds., *Grágás*, pp. 75–108; Heusler, *Isländisches Recht*, pp. 235–258. 8 ↵
9. Ólafur Halldórsson, ed., *Jónsbók* (Odense, 1970), pp. 100–110. In this context, reference should be made to a study by Sidsel Grevle, “Kirkens og det verdilige samfunnets syn på fattige i norsk middelalder,” *Historisk Tidsskrift* 81 (2002): pp. 27–53, which, drawing on the law codes *Gulatingsslov* and *Frostatingslov*, examines the changes that took place in poor relief and in attitudes towards the poor during the tenure of Archbishop Øystein Erlendsson (1161–1188). Archbishop Øystein endeavoured to implement poor relief in accordance with the provisions of canon law, as laid down in the *Decretum Gratiani*. 9 ↵
10. Tryggvi Þórhallsson, “Ómagahald”, p. 131. 10 ↵
11. DI, I, No. 22. 11 ↵
12. *Ibid.* 12 ↵
13. “Vararfeldir” refers to a type of fur whose exact nature cannot be determined (Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog*, vol. 3 [Oslo, 1954], p. 866).). Recent research comes to the result, it might be like “rökkvafeldur”, woolen cloth or cape of wool with shaggy woolpieces webt into it to make it waterproof. It was used lika a poncho and

was in winter more useful than a thin cloth. (Oral information 2026 from the weaver Guðrún Hallfríður Bjarnadóttir (Hadda) in Akureyri. 13 ↵

14. DI I, No. 22 14 ↵

15. A "hundred" was a unit of value and originally (in the 12th century) corresponded to the value of a cow or 120 ells of woven woolen cloth. Six pregnant ewes with fleece were considered to be worth a cow or a hundred. These units of value remained in use in Iceland until the 19th century. However, they were subject to fluctuations in value because they became detached from the original object. See Páll Briem, "Hundraðatal á jörðum," Lögfræðingur: Tímarit um lögfræði, löggjafarmál og þjóðhagfræði 4 (1900): pp. 11-13. 15 ↵

16. Dómr Þorvarðs lögmanns Erlendssonar um manneldi (DI XII, No. 37). 16 ↵

17. "Lausamaður" was a man who was neither a farmer nor a farmhand, but who earned his living in some other way through his own labor, for example as a fisherman or craftsman. The view expressed by Fritzner, Ordbog, vol. 2:434, that these were people without a fixed residence, cannot be accepted in light of their wealth. They were simply not tied to the land. 17 ↵

18. Einar Hafliðason, Lárentíus saga biskups. in: Biskupasögur III (Íslensk fornrit, XVIII) (Reykjavík, 1998), p. 339. 18 ↵

19. "búlaus maður" was either a servant or a "lausamaður" (DI XII, No. 37). 19 ↵

20. Ibid.: „nótt á hverjum xc“ 20 ↵

21. DI X, No 227. 21 ↵

22. Ibid. These rules regarding tithes are enshrined in Bishop Árni's "Christian Law", and they are quite detailed. Everyone over the age of 14 who was in good health was required, according to certain rules, to fast during legally binding periods of fasting. "Biskop Arnes kristenret". in Norges gamle love indtil 1387, vol. 5 (1895), pp. 48-49. 22 ↵

23. Sturla was required to pay fines separately for each violation of the law; for example, he was fined 3 marks for the first year and 6 marks for the second year for underpaying the property tax; the payment for the third year was not specified, but it was stated that half of the fine was to go to the bishop. For the misappropriated food intended for the poor, he was fined for the next 4 years 18 ells of woven woolen cloth for each farmhand and each maid. For every head of livestock he had unlawfully withheld, he had to pay 18 ells. He was specifically charged with usury, but the penalty was not initially specified. 23 ↵

24. DI XI, No 301. 24 ↵

25. DI VI, No 590; XII, No 34. This applies to people who are able to work. In contrast, beggars should be provided with the bare necessities and their safe passage (e.g. crossing rivers) should be ensured. 25 ↵

26. DI VII, Nos. 241, 288. It is clear from the judgement (No. 241) that Sturla was required to disclose his financial circumstances and his obligation to provide for her. He argued that, under the law, he was not obliged to provide for this sick relative and pointed to Guttormur Ólafsson, who was more properly responsible for her care. Guttormur was consequently required to disclose his financial circumstances and his degree of kinship with Þóra. It transpired that Guttormur was both poor and heavily in debt. He was therefore able to

renounce his obligation towards Þóra, who was subsequently awarded to Sturla once again for her care. 26 ←

27. DI XIII, No. 537. 27 ←

28. DI XIII, No. 326 28 ←

29. DI XI, No. 286. 29 ←

30. "Hospice Farm" is the translation of the Icelandic terms "kristfjárfjörð" and "sælubú". Hospice farms were endowed by wealthy individuals to provide for the poor, the sick and the elderly. The deeds of foundation set out the detailed provisions regarding the running of the farms and the number of people to be cared for. 30 ←

31. DI I, No. 24. 31 ←

32. Magnús Már Lárusson, "Jordejendom," in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingertid til reformationstid*, vol. 7 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1962), cols. 671-677. 32 ←

33. DI I, No. 26. 33 ←

34. 1 öre was just under 27 g. 6 ells of woven woollen cloth equalled 1 'lögeyrir', i.e. a legally prescribed unit of currency. A 'Vætt' was a unit of weight of approx. 34.7 kg; 48 ells of woven woollen cloth were equivalent to one mark. At the same time, the vætt, the mark (= 214 g) and the öre (= 27 g) were all units of weight. Consequently, the value specifications in ells of woven woollen cloth are no longer comprehensible to us today. Finnur Jónsson, "Íslands mönt, mál og vægt," in *Nordisk Kultur: Mål og vægt*, vol. 30 (Copenhagen, 1936), pp. 155-161; Helgi Þorláksson, *Vaðmál og verðlag: Vaðmál í utanríkisviðskiptum og búskap Íslendinga á 13. og 14. öld* (Reykjavík, 1991), pp. 111-151. The numerical ratios are presented graphically in Gunnar Karlsson et al., eds., *Grágás*, pp. 512. 34 ←

35. DI I, No. 32. 35 ←

36. Ibid. 36 ←

37. DI IV, No. 428 37 ←

38. The term "Provent" refers to old-age care provided in return for payment, usually in a church-run institution, typically in the form of land equivalent in value to 30 cow-values. A "provent woman" was an elderly and wealthy woman who had entered into a contract for old-age care, usually with a church organisation. There are also examples of "provent contracts" with private individuals. The provent contract was a common form of old-age care amongst the upper classes in Iceland during the Middle Ages. 38 ←

39. DI VI, No. 25. 39 ←

40. DI IV, No. 446. 40 ←

41. See Gerd Althoff, *Verwandte, Freunde und Getreue: Zum politischen Stellenwert der Gruppenbildungen im früheren Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990). Althoff discusses in particular the festivals that served to hold a group together for political purposes. On these occasions, gifts were exchanged. See also: J. Bazelmans, "Gift and 'Gefolgschaft'," in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, vol. 11 (Berlin, 1998), pp. 468-470. 41 ←

42. DI, III, no. 42, pp. 115–149, p. 162; no. 182, pp. 233–234; no. 190, p. 242; nos. 190, 192, 287, 259, 419–449, p. 552 and p. 582; no. 519; V, nos. 233–314. 42 ↵
43. DI III, nos. 419–498, p. 552. 43 ↵
44. DI III, No. 247; No. 419–448, p. 585. 44 ↵
45. DI III, No. 190. This source indicates that the farmer Páll had purchased a charity plot at the church in Hoffell on Hornafjörður from the farmer Magnús in Skál for 12 hundred. The source does not reveal what Páll intended to do with this ‘charity plot for the poor’ or why the farmer Magnús held these rights to the church. 45 ↵
46. DI IV, Nos. 23, 47, 48, 103, 137, 151, 162, 192, 150. DI V, Nos. 241, 246, 258, 278, 298. 46 ↵
47. DI IV, No. 53; DI, VI, No. 307 (In this inventory, the milk donation is scheduled for Wednesday). 47 ↵
48. Páll Eggert Ólason, *Menn og menntir siðskiptaaldarinnar á Íslandi*, vol. 2 (Reykjavík, 1922), p. 26. 48 ↵
49. DI V, No. 241, p. 258: “... the portion allocated to the church is to be used to maintain a bridge over a stream and a river ferry.” 49 ↵
50. DI X, No. 28. 50 ↵
51. DI VII, No. 8 I. “In the year 1477: A meal consists of 2½ marks of butter or the equivalent in other foodstuffs.” No. 8 II: “In the year 1477: According to an old regulation, 3 ½ ells per week are [deemed appropriate] for an elderly woman. For an elderly man in need of care, 4 ells [are appropriate]. However, if he requires nursing care, 5 ells [are appropriate]” 51 ↵
52. “Jarteinir úr sögu Þorláks biskups hinni yngstu,” in *Biskupa sögur Bókmentafélagsins*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1858), p. 379. 52 ↵
53. Ibid., p. 382 53 ↵
54. “Hungrvaka,” in *Biskupa sögur Bókmentafélagsins*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1858), p. 63. 54 ↵
55. See note 13. 55 ↵
56. DI I, No. 22. 56 ↵
57. „Hungrvaka“ p. 74. 57 ↵
58. Ibid, p. 81. 58 ↵
59. “Saga Þorláks biskups hin elzta,” in *Biskupa sögur Bókmentafélagsins*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1858), p. 102. 59 ↵
60. Ibid., p. 104. 60 ↵
61. “Jóns biskups saga, hin elzta,” in *Biskupa sögur Bókmentafélagsins*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1858), p. 166. 61 ↵
62. “Saga Guðmundar Arasonar Hóla-biskups, hin elzta,” in *Biskupa sögur Bókmentafélagsins*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1858), p. 477. 62 ↵
63. Einar Hafliðason, *Lárentíus saga biskups*, p. 341; DI, II, nos. 204–336, p. 433. 63 ↵

64. Einar Hafliðason, *Lárentíus saga biskups*, p. 380. It is also noted: "Every time he celebrated Mass, five poor people were to be brought into the house and given a proper meal" (p. 376). 64 ↵
65. *Ibid.*, p. 378. 65 ↵
66. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, "Introduction," in *Biskupa sögur III*, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, *Íslensk fornrit*, vol. 18 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1998), p. LXIV. 66 ↵
67. [Þórður Jónsson í Hítardal], "Æfisaga og ættbálkur Jóns biskups og barna hans," in *Biskupa sögur Bókmentafélagsins*, vol. 2 (Copenhagen, 1878), p. 354. 67 ↵
68. "Kvæði um Ögmund biskup," in *Biskupa sögur Bókmentafélagsins*, vol. 2 (Copenhagen, 1878), pp. 305–314, especially p. 311. 68 ↵
69. Einar Hafliðason, *Lárentíus saga biskups*, p. 387. 69 ↵
70. Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga*, vol. 2 (Reykjavík, 1958), p. 282. 70 ↵
71. "Jarteinir úr sögu Þorláks biskups hinni yngstu," p. 386 ff. 71 ↵
72. DI VI, No. 95 72 ↵
73. *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, ed. Chr. C. A. Lange et al., vol. 2 (Christiania, 1851), no. 16a. 73 ↵
74. DI IX, No. 301 D-F. 74 ↵
75. Ragnheiður Mósedóttir, "Bessastaðabók og varðveisla Viðeyjarklaustursskjala," *Saga* 34 (1996): p. 220. 75 ↵
76. DI XI, No. 173. 76 ↵
77. In his will, Knight Torfi Arason, who died in Bergen in 1459, bequeathed "to the choir monks a blue cloak and a brown coat with silver buckles, to the lay brothers 20 ells of woven woollen cloth, but to the minor brothers 6 ells of woven woollen cloth". DI V, No. 175. 77 ↵
78. "Jarðabækur klaustranna 1637," *Leyndarskjalasafn*, suppl. 2, pp. 44, 45, 46, 48, 96, *Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands*, Reykjavík. 78 ↵
79. Magnús Már Lárusson and Björn Lárusson, *The Old Icelandic Land Registers* (Lund, 1967), p. 67. 79 ↵
80. DI III, No. 628. 80 ↵
81. "Lögmannsannáll," in Gustav Storm, ed., *Icelandic Annals up to 1578* (Christiania, 1888; repr., Oslo, 1977), p. 287. 81 ↵
82. Jón Gizurarson, "Ritgjörð," in *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenskra bókmenta*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1853), p. 676. 82 ↵
83. DI XI, No. 234. 83 ↵
84. DI X, No. 224, p. 504. 84 ↵
85. Michel Mollat, *Die Armen im Mittelalter* (München, 1987), p. 51. 85 ↵
86. DI, X, No. 95, p. 246. 86 ↵

87. Vilborg Auður Ísleifsdóttir-Bickel, *The Revolution from the Top in Iceland 1537–1565: The Birth of an Early Modern State* (Wiesbaden, 2026), pp. 69–70. 87 ↵
88. DI X, No. 95, p. 229. 88 ↵
89. DI X, No. 95, p. 118. See also Jörgen Stenbæk, “Den danske kirkeordinans af 1537/39 – teologi og funktion,” in Carl-Gustav Andrén, ed., *Reformationen i Norden: Kontinuitet och fornyelse* (Lund, 1973), p. 130. 89 ↵
90. On this issue, see Ísleifsdóttir-Bickel, *The Revolution from the Top*, 135–52; see also Ísleifsdóttir-Bickel, “Siðbót eða bylting,” 66–71. 90 ↵
91. Bronisław Geremek, *Geschichte der Armut: Elend und Barmherzigkeit in Europa* (Munich, 1988), p. 26. 91 ↵
92. DI, X, No. 95, p. 235. 92 ↵
93. DI, X, No. 95, p. 228. 93 ↵
94. Vilborg Auður Ísleifsdóttir-Bickel, *The Revolution from the Top*, p. 256. 94 ↵
95. „Tykkis Kongel. Majest. godt være, at der ingen Hospitaler skal stigtes paa Island, meden at de Fattige drager omkring Landet, og søger efter deris Underholling hvor de best kunde ...”. Oddgeir Stephensen et al., eds., *Lovsamling for Island I* (Copenhagen, 1853), p. 74. 95 ↵
96. DI, XIII, No. 155. A letter from Bishop Jón Arason dated 1540 may be cited by way of comparison. In it, the bishop states that in recent years there had been a great famine and that it had been necessary to help the poor. However, many had died whom the good people who could have helped were unable to reach. Evidently, there was hope of help at that time, provided the poor were able to seek it out and actually find it. 96 ↵
97. Ibid. 97 ↵
98. DI, XIV, no. 46: Spjaldhagadómur; no. 268: Miðgarðdómur; no. 267: dómur við Vallalaug; XV, no. 155: sjöttardómur; *Alþingisbækur Íslands*, vols. 1–16 (Reykjavík, 1922–1988), vol. 2, pp. 11–18, 67–71. These are just a few examples illustrating the situation; there is much more evidence to support this. 98 ↵
99. Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson has studied the plight of the poor in Iceland over the last three centuries. Reference is made here to his relevant works in this field. See Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, “Löggjöf um fátækraframfærslu og stjórn fátækra mála á 18. öld,” *Saga XXI* (1983), pp. 39–72; see also Gunnlaugsson, “Ómagar og utangarðsfólk: Fátækramál Reykjavíkur 1786–1907, ‘Þraut er að vera þurfamaður...’,” in *Saga og samfélag: Essays on Social History of the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Reykjavík, 1997), pp. 130–143. 99 ↵