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'NOBLESSE DE ROBE' IN A CLASSLESS SOCIETY

The making of an Icelandic elite in the Age of Absolutism

Concentrating on the identity of the Icelandic elite during the 18th and the 19th century, the article argues that the introduction of "rang" or "noblesse de robe" – in the Danish-Norwegian monarchy gave higher officials a European aristocratic identity. The author discusses how this aristocratic identity of the elite fits in with the historical discussion about the nature of Icelandic society, traditionally described as a society without any real social boundaries.

In the spring of 1803, the diocesan governor (*i.stiftamtmaður*)¹ of Iceland, Ólafur Stephensen, was tried by a Royal investigating-commission. When asked, if it was true that he had threatened to imprison cottagers in the village of Reykjavik if they refused to work for him without payment, governor Stephensen declined to answer advising the commission that such "assumption, concerning *mon* by the king made a knightly honour, is far too insulting." He concluded his statement by telling the investigating officials that he was assured that they took his word as an honourable royal official as more reliable than the ones of simple farmers.² During the last few decades, historians have sought explanation on why the emergence of nationalism and claims for sovereignty in Iceland during the 19th century went through so peacefully in comparison to many other countries in Europe, which were parts of conglomerate states.³ One of the main explanations given for this concerns the assumed homogeneous character of Icelandic society; the non-existence of any real social boundaries. Though certain reinterpretations of the social structure in Iceland has emerged, the main emphasis has been on the role of nationalism as a unifying force against Danish rule and on the question why Icelanders on the whole were claiming sovereignty from a government that had allowed them to rule themselves without any great interference during the preceding centuries.

Most historians have reluctantly accepted that there existed an Icelandic elite, but this particular elite has rarely been brought to the centre of attention. Hardly ever has the elite been clearly defined; the assumption often being taken for granted that the Icelandic elite based its identity on its status as landowners.

In the following the presumed homogeneity of Icelandic society – “the society without classes” – will be questioned. By looking at the Icelandic elite within the official frames of the Danish Monarchy as a whole, the elite cannot only be redefined, but it is even possible to reveal its cultural identity, to state its own awareness of its role in society and thereby question older assumptions about the social structure of the Icelandic society. The purpose of this article will therefore be to define the cultural identity of the Icelandic elite in the age of Danish absolutism. The example given above, of Ólafur Stephensen’s notion of his place in society, clearly shows that he identified himself as a *noble aristocrat* of the *Danish* monarchy. Before going any further it is necessary to give some insight in the historiography of the role of the elite in 19th-century Iceland, and to define the elite within the framework of the Danish Absolute Monarchy.

The role of the Icelandic elite

Historians in the past and even today, claim that it is impossible, or at least difficult, to make any distinction between classes and estates in 18th and 19th-century Iceland in the traditional sense as when discussing European societies. According to these historians, it is hard to define any elite, because any formal distinction between i.e. the landowners or officials and the rest of society did not exist. There was simply no Icelandic aristocracy or Icelandic noblemen in any sense. As one of the nationalistic historians of the 1950s concluded: “In the eyes of the law, there existed only one class. All Icelanders were farmers, and though some officials existed, they were also farmers.”⁴ These words seem to echo in the writings of historians up to the 1990s, though of course with modifications. Scholars like Kirsten Hastrup have concluded that Icelandic culture was best described in *singularis*, due to the homogeneity of the Icelandic society. The historian Gunnar Karlsson stated in 1987 that even though it is possible to distinguish economic differences within the society, the fact that social mobility was not restricted in any sense, indicates that it is not possible to reveal any cultural differences within the society.⁵ Karlsson later on modified his conclusion, but still claims that cultural differences were vague.⁶ Social-historian Loftur Guttormsson on the other hand uses a bipolar model in this respect and describes the culture of Icelandic society as divided into elite- and popular culture, thereby accepting the existence of a distinct elite.⁷

Historians, who have been preoccupied with the political development in Iceland, during the 19th century as well as the development of the state, have come to the conclusion that there existed a powerful Icelandic elite. This elite mainly consisted of higher officials, closely connected to the richest landowners and that this elite was probably the single most influential factor in Icelandic society, during the 18th and the 19th centuries.⁸

The only real attempt to define the Icelandic elite and to seek the roots to its influence was made by the political scientist (now president of Iceland) Ólafur R. Grímsson in his nearly forgotten doctoral thesis from 1970. But as the authors mentioned above, Grímsson only came to the conclusion that the elite was influential; he did not make any attempt to discover the elite’s identity or whether it tried to distinguish itself from the rest of the society.⁹

In recent years, there has been a tendency among researchers to question the homogeneity of Icelandic culture during the 18th and the 19th centuries. In 1997, Harald Gustafsson became one of the first to draw the attention to the fact that it was hardly enough to point out the existence of an Icelandic elite of high officials and landowners. If the elite did not identify itself as an elite, or if neither the state nor the general public identified them as an elite, it was no point in using this term in historical research.¹⁰

Gustafsson's point becomes even clearer if it is put into context of how the elite of the Danish-Norwegian monarchy as a whole has been treated by historians such as Leon Jespersen, Sebastian Olden Jørgensen and not least Peter Henningsen.¹¹ Henningsen argues for caution in projecting the modern concept of class back into the centuries of absolutism. He and the others mentioned above, claims that social stratification at the time was not determined in the modern sense of economically defined classes, but by division of estates, defined by cultural criteria. As both Olden-Jørgensen and Henningsen show, the introduction of the "rang" in 1671 created a new official system that radically defied estate conceptions. With the new system of "rang", honour and nobility were bestowed as a sign of royal favour by assigning an individual to a place in the new hierarchy of "rang". Provided any burgher, or even someone born as a peasant, was in possession of "rang", he always preceded any noble lacking "rang". Henningsen shows how the introduction of the "rang" gradually undermined the conception of a predetermined social order. One of his conclusions is that the system of "rang" unleashed a social and genteel rivalry between the old estates. What is of interest here is that Henningsen claims the "rang" created a possibility of social mobility for those with talent, ambition and economic means.¹² It is interesting to compare Henningsen's cultural analysis to Gunnar Karlsson class-analysis of the Icelandic society, mentioned above, in which Karlsson came to the conclusion that within the Icelandic society of the 18th and 19th century, social mobility was indeed possible and that class boundaries were in fact insignificant.¹³ It thus seems that a cultural analysis of the significance of "rang" in the Icelandic society confirms the conclusions of Karlsson's research but at the same time reveals the necessity of a different approach to social indifferences within the Icelandic society of the 18th and 19th century.

In his article, mentioned above, Gustafsson advocates for the introduction of *New cultural history* into research on Icelandic society of early modern period. In her doctoral thesis, Danish historian Christina Ax, accepted the challenge and used a bipolar model to analyse Icelandic cultural society as on the one hand an elite culture and on the other as popular culture, adhered to by the rest of the society.¹⁴ Her main purpose was to discern a variety of cultural profiles within popular culture as well as "the middling sort", i.e. a dynamic cultural profile emerging at the borders of elite and popular cultures. Though mainly concerned with various cultural profiles within the popular culture, Ax defines the Icelandic elite as consisting of regional and local officials and landowners. This elite had a clear notion of its role in the society, which was expressed e.g. through luxury consumption.¹⁵ In this respect, the behaviour of the Icelandic elite seems parallel to the conduct of the Danish elite as described in Mikkel Venborg Pedersen's recent study of *conspicuous consumption* in the Duchy of Augustenborg.¹⁶ Ax, on the other hand, does not stress any official distinction between the elite and the rest of the society. It is though quite clear that diocesan

governor Ólafur Stephensen, cited above, did not share this view. But where did governor Stephensen get the idea about his noble status? The answer lies in the administrative changes, brought about at the onset of Danish absolutism.

The new representatives of the absolute king

It is hard to understand the elite's role in the Danish-Norwegian Monarchy without a brief introduction of the new administrative system, brought into effect during the latter part of the 17th century. In general, the evolution of the administration within the kingdom can best be described in the terms of standardization. Instead of different offices and official terms operating in various parts of the monarchy, similar governmental structures and administrative mechanisms were put to practise in Denmark, Norway, Iceland, The Faeroe Islands and the Duchies.

All threads of the administration came together in Copenhagen were the administrative boards, particularly the Exchequers office (Renterkammer) and the Danish Chancery (Danske kanseli), were of central importance. As a rule the civil administration consisted of a diocesan governor, county governors and bailiffs.¹⁷ The diocesan governor was the highest ranking official outside the central administration. He supervised almost all state activity in his district – the most significant exception being the military. As the “rang” title suggests, the Diocesan governor also had some supervisory authority over the church along with the bishops of each diocese (stift). In the case of Iceland, it was divided into two dioceses (until the end of the 18th century) but had only one diocesan governor.¹⁸ The diocesan governor was traditionally also a county governor in the central county of the diocese. All other counties had ordinary governors (amtmand). Around 1750 there were 12 diocesan governors and about 40 governors in the whole of the Denmark-Norway, including Iceland. During most of the 18th century, the office of diocesan governor of Iceland was traditionally held by some high ranking official who sat in Copenhagen and never visited Iceland. His administrative burden was in the hands of the county governor. This came to an end in 1770, when the diocesan governor took up residence at Bessastaðir and Iceland becoming divided into two counties. These became three in 1787, the South county (Suðuramt) where the diocesan governor served as a governor, the West county (Vesturamt) and the North- and East county (Norður- og Austuramt).¹⁹ Under the county governors were about 20 bailiffs (sýslumenn). The Icelandic bailiffs handled not only administrative matters within their bailiwick, such as tax assessment and collection, but were also judges in local courts, in similar ways as the Danish counterpart, the Herredsfogede.

In one aspect the Icelandic (and in fact the Faeroese) administration differed from the one in Denmark and Norway. The office of State Fiscal (Landfógeti) was established at the end of the 17th century. The State fiscal was mainly a tax collector. He was under the direct rule of the Diocesan governor and without a direct authority over the bailiffs except in matters of tax collection.²⁰

During the 18th century the juridical system consisted (apart from the bailiffs in the local court) of two lawmen (lögmennt) and the court of the Althing. However at the turn of the 19th century a new permanent court was established in Reykjavik, with one head judge and two assessors.

As seen from above, the administration of Iceland did not count numerous officials. But it is vital to bear in mind that the Icelandic officials served as officials of the king and were a part of a wide-ranging administration throughout the kingdom, under the direct rule of the king and the central authorities in Copenhagen. This fact also obliged them to be placed in the “rang”. Keeping this in mind, it becomes a matter of fact that, like all royal officials of the Danish-Norwegian kingdom, officials in Iceland became placed in the hierarchical structure of the “rang”.

The introduction of the “rang”

One of the consequences of absolute rule in the Danish monarchy (1660) was the introduction of the “rang” and the “rangadeln” – the Danish version of “noblesse de robe”²¹. The conception of nobility was completely redefined with the introduction of the administrative nobility. Ignoring the old four-estate system, the new order was based on the monarch’s will and the administrative system of the absolute king.²² Social status was now regulated by means of the so-called regulations of the “rang”, the first of which dates from 1671. The table of “rang” was revised innumerable times.²³ What is of most importance here is that the “rang” was subject to the role of the civil administration. All civil servants were positioned with regard to rank while most of the old nobility and the clerical estate were not.²⁴ This meant that those who were appointed officials automatically took position in the “rang”, became “nobleman” in the same sense as those who belonged to the “old” aristocracy. The “rang” was divided into different classes and several categories within every class. This of course was created to regulate the civic administration in a hierarchical manner. Frederick V regulation of “rang” from 1746 included nine classes of which each was divided into 8–17 categories. This means that the difference between the highest ranking official in class 1 and the lowest ranking official in class 9 counted 99 categories.²⁵ The only difference between the old aristocracy and the new noblesse de robe was that the official’s noble title was personal and could not be passed on through inheritance.²⁶ There are though some exceptions from this rule that are of importance. The highest posts within the clerical hierarchy, i.e. bishops, were placed within the “rang”. And while the noble title was personal, on some occasions and during some periods (e.g. 1693–1717) the highest ranking officials of the three highest classes not only obtained a personal noble title, but one that became inheritable to his legitimate children.²⁷

But a place in the “rang” depended not only on the hierarchical status of office. Titles enabled individuals to gain higher status. This was something the monarchy took great advantage of and already in 1715, the king started selling titles to the old nobility and other groups of people outside the “rang”. These titles were of course also awarded to civil servants for merit. But while a simple burgher had to pay 600 rdl for the title of “kammerråd”, a civil servant could be expected to gain title as an award for loyal service to the king.²⁸ Officials of the “rang”, on the other hand, paid annual tax, so-called “rangskat”, to the king.

It is also vital to point out that the status of the “rang” did not include any feudal rights for the new nobility. But Icelandic officials were, on the other hand, freed from paying any tax of the farm they inhabited while in office.

The Icelandic administrative elite

A study of recruitment and composition of the cadre of regional officials in Iceland reveals these as a homogeneous group in terms of work experience and education. In terms of nationality, about half of all regional officials in Iceland were Icelandic, a few were Norwegians, and the rest were of Danish origin. They were however, unevenly distributed among regional offices. During the latter part of the 18th century, the central government in Copenhagen successively began to appoint Icelanders as county governors and state fiscals. However, apart from the period 1790–1806 when Ólafur Stephensen held office, the central government never appointed an Icelandic to the highest office of the diocesan governor.²⁹

Although related through kinship or marriage, relatively few of the Icelandic officials were themselves sons of high-ranking officials. The Icelandic officials formed a social network, based on family relations, which became the most important source of influence in the administrative system in Iceland. By the means of marriage strategies, the network reproduced itself and maintained its strength. Cousin marriages were, for instance, practiced for the purpose of, not only keeping land and property within the family, but also for securing administrative regional offices as sources of power.³⁰

The central authorities in Copenhagen were well aware of the Icelandic officials social network. It attempted to secure its own authority and influence in Iceland by appointing only men of Danish origin as diocesan governors. When appointing governors and state fiscals during the 19th century, the central authority relied on Icelandic candidates, but often tried to recruit those who did not belong to the already existing social networks.³¹ These attempts by the central administration were resisted by Icelandic networks through marriages, resulting in a network of interwoven connections between all regional officials.

The introduction of the noblesse de robe in the Danish monarchy meant that Icelanders who were appointed as royal officials became members of the higher strata of the Danish noblesse de robe. Bailiffs, the core of the civil administrations were, of course, not highly ranked and the same went for the lawmen of the 18th century and the assessors of the 19th century. But as in the rest of the society, they all gained a higher status than non-ranking groups, such as the clerical people with the exception of bishops, the small group of burghers in Iceland and, presumably, the small group of Icelanders that acclaimed noble status.³²

Noble status – a dividing form of identification within the elite?

As mention before, the system of the “rang”-nobility underwent several changes during the 18th century. The offices of governors and diocesan governors tended to climb the hierarchical scale as the importance of those offices increased within the administrative system of the monarchy. By 1746, diocesan governors, bishops and those with the title *étatsråd* were all ranked in class three. After the administrative reforms of 1793, the importance and dignity of the governors became more obvious and both offices were now ranked within the three highest steps of the rang which meant that not only the diocesan governors and the governors were obliged to call themselves noble, the noble title was even applied to their sons and family. This is repeated in the regulation of the “rang” in 1808.³³ This however, was not the case of

the other, lower ranked offices within the administration, except for those who gained titles, such as *kammerråd*, *konferensråd* and *étatsråd*. This means that the Icelandic elite, as it was defined in Ax's study from 1998, possibly included two cultural profiles, i.e. one that could acclaim *high* noble status for themselves *and* for their families, and another that could not.

The introduction of this new noble status into Icelandic society went unnoticed by most Icelanders during the first decades, due to the fact that no Icelanders were appointed to those offices until the mid-18th century.³⁴ The most interesting part in this context is that for the first time the Icelandic elite got a symbol of identity, bound by the law of the Danish Monarchy, which opened up a possibility for the elite to make both formal and informal distinction between itself and the rest of the Icelandic society. Here, it is also possible to add that by holding the regional offices within the network, its members were able to withhold a noble status and a noble identity, that otherwise would have been lost, due to the fact that the noble title was not inheritable.

This assumption does, though, depend on whether different groups in the society acknowledged the noble status of the upper elite. If the noble officials of the elite did not identify themselves as noble, or if neither the state, the common people (and those who acclaimed *noble de droit* status) or the lower officials (themselves also being members of the "rang") did not identify them as noble, it is no point in using this definition to distinguish them as having a distinct cultural profile within the elite, or within society for that matter.³⁵

There is no doubt that the central administration in Copenhagen acknowledged the noble status of the higher officials in Iceland, in the same way as it did in the rest of the monarchy. This can be seen in the fact that laws and statutes about the issue were sent to Iceland, addressed to its people.³⁶ The same official letters were distributed to lower officials and discussed in the Althing, and later on in the high court of Reykjavik, a process often seen as obligatory for laws and ordinances to be put in practice in Iceland. During the 1850s and onwards, these official papers concerning the "rang" of the noble officials were published in *Lovsamling for Island*, which manifested the fact that even the leaders of the national movement believed in the right of the higher officials to call themselves noble.³⁷ The sources mentioned above are, of course, normative sources and do therefore not reveal anything about the attitude of the lower officials towards the noble ones. But the sources indicate that the society, including the lower officials of the "rang", were, *de juris*, forced to acknowledge the noble status of the higher officials and their families. An example that indicates that lower officials acknowledged the noble status can be found in a letter, written by Ísleifur Einarsson, a judge (assessor) of the high court in Reykjavik in 1803, addressed to the central authorities in Copenhagen. In his letter, Einarsson reflects over his role as an investigating official in the case forced that diocesan governor Ólafur Stephensen to leave his post. In the letter he describes the governor as both noble and honourable, words that can be interpreted as Einarsson's acknowledgement of Stephensen's noble status.³⁸

There are no sources that indicate that the common people of Iceland were aware of the noble status of the higher officials and their families. This is however not surprising as sources that give a clear picture of the social status of nobility in the eyes of the common people are immensely hard to come by. As the Norwegian historian

Ståle Dyrvik has pointed out, it is always hard to find sources that reveal contemporary views on social distinction within societies of the past. He also points out that marriage strategies can be seen as instructive in this respect.³⁹ As mentioned above, the higher officials in Iceland and their families were interlocked in marriages, through cousin marriage and so on throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Recent historical writings asserting the noble status of the officials have been questioned by Ax, stating that the common people acknowledged the Icelandic elite as homogeneous.⁴⁰ One could argue that this lack of acknowledgement has more to do with lack of sources and the fact that the common people seldom had knowledge of which laws and orders were passed by the distant central administration in Copenhagen, due to the fact that there was no tradition in Iceland for priests to read out new laws to the people. When diocesan governor Ólafur Stephensen got the news that he was to behold his honour and would not be brought to court for his crimes in office in 1806, he saw himself forced to print and publish a notice to the people of Iceland, stating his “innocence”.⁴¹ Otherwise, he would not have been able to spread the news to the masses.

But did the high officials see themselves as nobles? The opinion of diocesan governor Ólafur Stephensen becomes quite obvious by his statement, quoted in the beginning of the article. The same indication can be found in statements of other officials. Governor Stephensen's son, Magnús Stephensen, was the supreme judge of the high court in Reykjavik in the beginning of the 19th century. A doctor of law, one of the island's biggest landowners and a profound leader of the Enlightenment in Iceland, Stephensen published in 1820 a pamphlet on the social order of the Icelandic society. As he freely admitted, the social classification he offered was little more than a raw adaptation of the old European tripartite estate of the *Ancien Regime*. Then he continues, as “it has been reckoned from time immemorial... I deem there are three Estates in this country, - namely: The Office-holders, the Clerical, and the Peasant class.” Stephensen then concludes that all classes are of equal importance and stresses the role of the first two Estates as “ordained by the creator...to protect and to speak for the subordinated.”⁴² Historians have rightfully interpreted Stephensen's words as if he was trying to convince the reader that the social order in Iceland was divine and should therefore not be subject to any changes.⁴³ But could Stephensen's argument as well be interpreted as statement of the Icelandic elite's awareness of its own nobility? Magnús Stephensen was noble, in the way that he was a son of a diocesan governor. But he had also been awarded the title of *justitsråd* (1800), *étatsråd* (1808) and *konferensråd* (1816) making him a member of the first class of the “rang” and having the right to be address as “his excellence”.⁴⁴ It is hardly a coincidence that Stephensen's arguments bear great similarity to the Kameralistic writings of Andreas Schytte in 1775. Schytte, a professor at the Sorø academy in Denmark, proclaimed the divine status of the estates.⁴⁵ One has, however, to bear in mind that Stephensen writes his text almost half a century later, when the classification of the “rang” had, probably had a great impact on the identification of social distinction in the kingdom of Denmark-Norway. According to Peter Henningsen, the concept estate (stand) underwent a complete change during the 18th century. In the year 1700 it was an expression for a precise political and social status; in the year 1800, its meaning was more of a definition of a job description.⁴⁶ If we take that cultural approach to “His Excellence” Stephensen's writings, the meaning of his text seems to indicate that he

was well aware of his status as a noble member of the “rang”. During his active life, Magnús Stephensen applied on several occasions for the post as a diocesan governor in Iceland but was always ignored by the central authorities, assumingly with references to his father’s time in office.⁴⁷ His brother, Stefán Stephensen, was on the other hand appointed as governor in the West county of Iceland, even though, as Magnús commented, his brother was hardly worth an honourable post like that. But even though judge Stephensen doubted his brother’s ability to take on the honourable governorship, it did not prevent him from marrying *all* his children to his brother’s children. By marrying his two daughters and his son to the children of governor Stefán, he made sure that they stayed within a family who could claim a noble identity.⁴⁸

Several other statements made by higher officials in Iceland seem to reveal that at least some of them identified themselves as noble, such as Sveinn Sölvason, a lawman in the late-18th century and Skúli Magnússon, the state fiscal.⁴⁹ This indicates that the concept “middling sort” should be used for a different profile than the one defined by Ax in her research.⁵⁰ The words of the officials cited above suggest that the Icelandic elite should be divided in at least two different profiles. On the one hand, you have the lower ranking officials without titles, placed in the lower ranks. These officials shared the same profile as better-off farmers, and may be categorized as “the middling sort”.⁵¹

The noble, regional officials, the bishops and their elite-network, on the other hand, had a completely different notion of themselves. The values they shared originated in the culture of the monarchy, values that were not shared by other Icelanders. The difference between these two cultural profiles within the Icelandic elite, that is the ones with a noble identity, and the ones without, was not sharp, but quite dynamic. For instance, both groups shared the traditional values about how the Icelandic agrarian society should best be ruled. The main difference was that the high officials identified themselves with the rest of the monarchy’s *noblesse de robe* and shared the culture of the elites in Europe, though with certain differences. There was hardly any *nobles de droit* in Iceland to whom the *nobles de robe* could form alliances with. However, the official’s networks struggle to demarcate themselves from others in Icelandic society was expressed through identity-building activities rooted in European elite cultures and values not found in Icelandic tradition. The elites’ attempts to distinguish themselves from the rest of the society can be revealed in what often is called *conspicuous consumption*, i.e. the “right” lifestyle.⁵² The regional officials of the late-18th century, the state fiscal Skúli Magnússon, the governor Magnús Gíslason and his son in law, Ólafur Stephensen, competed in building residences and churches for themselves, those being the only stone mansions preserved from the 18th century in Iceland. When drawing a picture of his farm Leirárgarðar, Ólafur Stephensen signs the picture with the words, “distinctive noble estate”.⁵³ Skúli Magnússon, on the other hand, always called his residence “the Palace” (slottet).⁵⁴ Ólafur Stephensen even refused to move to his governor district in North Iceland in 1771, claiming that he could not move his furniture with him and without those he simply could not live.⁵⁵ In great many travel books from the 18th and the 19th centuries the writers describe how the higher officials in Iceland held homes that differed greatly from others and their descriptions reveal a notion of status and luxury consumption.⁵⁶

This indicates that the Icelandic society was culturally more complex than has previously been understood. Although the homogeneity of the Icelandic society has often been questioned, the idea of the elite, with the high officials of the king in the foreground, being of noble status as members of the kings “rang” has until now gone unnoticed by historians.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that by the means of a cultural approach, it is possible to rewrite the social history of the upper strata in 18th- and 19th-century Iceland. I have suggested that the Icelandic elite of higher officials gained status as nobles when appointed as officials within the civic administration. Though this noble status had its roots in the introduction of the *rang* in the monarchy during the 17th century, it didn't play a role in Icelandic society until after the mid-18th century, when the first Icelanders were appointed to the offices that were classified within the three highest classes of the *rang*. Those who became governors, diocesan governors, bishops or got the titles of *étatsråd* or *konferensråd* were entitled a noble status, as well as their families. Those who gained noble status were fully aware of it and this noble identity became one of the driving forces in the networking of families that came close to monopolizing the regional offices in Iceland for two centuries. This indicates that the introduction of the *noblesse de robe* probably had greater impact in Iceland than in any other part of the Danish monarchy.

Notes

- 1 In this article, all administrative terms are translated into English in accordance to the terminology used by Harald Gustafsson in his book *Political Interaction in the Old Regime. Central Power and Local Society in the Eighteenth-Century Nordic States*. (Lund, 1994).
- 2 Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands (The Iceland National Archive), Skjalasafn Kansallís, KA 64, Undersøgelses Commissions Rapport til Det Kongelige Danske Kancellie, Sept. 5th 1804.
- 3 G. Hálfðanarson, “Iceland: A peaceful secession.” *Scandinavian Journal of History*. vol. 25: (2000), nos. 1–2, pp. 87f.
- 4 *Saga Íslendinga* V, (Reykjavik, 1945) p. 155. For a modified version, though without any mention of the formal aristocracy, see A. Kristinsson, “Iceland's Elite in the Early Modern Period.” *Nätverk i historisk forskning- metafor, metod eller teori?* (Växjö, 1999) pp. 146ff.
- 5 K. Hastrup, *Nature and Policy in Iceland 1400–1800. An anthropological Analysis of History and Mentality*. (Oxford, 1990). G. Karlsson, “Folk og nation på Island.” *Scandia*, 53, vol.1: (1987) pp. 141ff.
- 6 G. Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*. (Malaysia, 2000) p. 166.
- 7 L. Guttormsson, “Íslandske forestillingsverdener i brudfladen mellem ortodoksi og folkekultur.” *Mellem Gud og Djævelen. Religiøse og magiske verdensbilleder i Norden 1500–1800*. (Copenhagen, 2001).
- 8 The historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and the economic-historian Guðmundur Jónsson came to this conclusion in their doctoral thesis in 1991. Neither thesis

- emphasizes the consistence of the elite which explains why neither of the authors does any attempt to define the elite any further. G. Hálfðanarson, “Old provinces, modern nations: Political responses to state integration in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth- century Iceland and Brittany.” (Cornell, 1991) Dissertation; G. Jónsson, “The State and the Icelandic Economy 1870–1930.” Dissertation (LSE, 1991). The Swedish historian Harald Gustafsson came to the same conclusion in his doctoral thesis in 1985. He went further on and pointed out close family connections between the most influential officials and land owners during the 18th century but did not make any effort to discover the motives and means of the Elite. Harald Gustafsson, *Mellan kung och allmoge. Ämbetsmän, beslutsprocess och inflytande på 1700- talets Island*. Dissertation (Stockholm, 1985).
- 9 Ó.R. Grímsson, “Political power in Iceland, prior to the period of class politics 1845–1916.” Dissertation (Manchester, 1970).
- 10 H. Gustafsson, “Hugleiðingar um samfélagsgerð Íslendinga á árnýöld.” *Íslenska söguþingið. Ráðstefnurit*. II. (Reykjavík, 1997) p. 115.
- 11 L. Jespersen, “Court Nobility in the Early Modern Denmark.” *Scandinavian Journal of History*. vol. 27: (2002) pp 129–142; S. Olden-Jørgensen, “State Ceremonial, Court Culture and Political Power in Early Modern Denmark, 1536–1746. *Scandinavian Journal of History*. vol 27: (2002) pp. 65–76; P. Henningsen, “Den bestandige maskerade. Statssamfund, rangsamfund og det 18. århundredes honnøtte kultur.” *Historisk tidsskrift*. Vol. 101, h. 2. (2001) pp. 313–342.
- 12 P. Henningsen, “Den bestandige maskerade.” pp. 313.
- 13 G. Karlsson, “Folk og nation på Island.” pp. 141 ff.
- 14 C. Ax, “De uregerlige. Den islandske almue og øvrighedens reformforsøg 1700–1870. Dissertation (Copenhagen, 2004); See also C. Ax, “Et andet Island. Kulturel kompleksitet på Seltjarnarnes 1750–1830.” *Cand.Mag.* (Univ. Copenhagen, 1998) pp. 24 ff.
- 15 Ibid, pp. 33 ff.
- 16 M. V. Pedersen, *Hertuger. At synes og at være I Augustenborg 1700–1850*. (Copenhagen, 2005), pp. 20–25.
- 17 H. Gustafsson, *Political Interaction in the Old Regime*. p. 54.
- 18 Ibid, p. 56; E. Hreinsson, *Nätverk och nepotism. Den regionala förvaltningen paa Island 1770–1870*. (Göteborg, 2003) Dissertation, p. 41.
- 19 Ibid, p. 58.
- 20 It is a common misunderstanding that the State fiscal was under the direct rule of the Exchequers office in Copenhagen. That is however not correct. The authority of the Diocesan governor over the State fiscal was stated in official letters several times during the latter part of the 18th century. See E. Hreinsson, *Nätverk och nepotism*, pp. 53–54.
- 21 One could question the use of the term noblesse de robe in this context, but it has already been done in a convincing way in the same field of studies. See S. Olden-Jørgensen, “State Ceremonial, Court Culture and Political Power”. p. 74.
- 22 P. Henningsen, “Den bestandige maskerade”. p. 325.
- 23 That is, in 1680, 1869, 1699, 1717, 1730, 1734, 1744, 1746, 1784, 1805 and 1808. S. Olden-Jørgensen, “State Ceremonial, Court Culture and Political Power”, p. 74. The Danish “rang” still exists, although its use is now restricted to the court of the queen.
- 24 Some historians have claimed that the introduction of the “rang” revolutionized the Danish community. Historians like Erling Ladewig Petersen and Knut J.V.

- Jespersen have claimed that it started the breakdown of the old society of estates. This has even been argued by Ståle Dyrvik and Peter Henningsen. See P. Henningsen, "Den bestandige maskerade". pp. 325–326.
- 25 Forordning af 14.10. 1746, Kong Friedrich den femtes allernaadigste Forordninger og Aabne Breve fra den 8de Augusti 1746 til samme Aars Udgang. RA. Here cited in P. Henningsen, "Den bestandige maskerade". p. 334.
- 26 G. Lind, "Den heroiske tid? Administrationen under den tidlige enevælde 1660–1720." *Dansk forvaltningshistorie, I. Fra middelalderen til 1901*. (Copenhagen, 2000). p. 181.
- 27 P. Henningsen, "Den bestandige maskerade". p. 326.
- 28 Ibid. p. 331–332.
- 29 E. Hreinsson, *Nätverk och nepotism*.
- 30 E. Hreinsson, "En premodern diplomatgerilla. Dansk hierarki möter isländskt nätverk." *Nätverk som social resurs. Historiska exempel*. (Lund, 2003) pp. 103 ff. In this article, the historical process is described with the help of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of *social field* and *capital* (symbolic-, cultural- and social-) as well as social networks.
- 31 Ibid. p. 116–118.
- 32 A serious research on the Icelandic nobility of the middle ages (*noblesse de droit*) and early modern times has never been done. But several factors indicate that at least until the 1750s, probably even during the 19th century, the relatives of the old nobility, still acclaimed noble status. This is often hard to discover through other means than the symbols of *conspicuous consumption* i.e. in paintings and items, often showing heralds and weapons of the old dynasties – þ. Kristjánsdóttir, *Mynd á þili. Íslenskir myndlistamenn á 16. 17. og 18. öld*. (Reykjavík, 2005), p. 103.
- 33 Kong Frederik den Siettes allernaadigste Forordninger og aabne Breve fra den 16de Martii 1808, til samme Aars Udgang. Kiøbenhavn, s. 119–122. – <http://www.vigerust.net/adel/rangforordning1808.html> (25.06.2005), *Forordning om rangen af 14. oktober 1746*. – http://www.arkeliet.net/sources/reglementer/Rangorningen_1746.htm (25.06.2005). See also V. Fenger, *En socialhistorisk undersøgelse af stiftamtmands- og amtmandsgruppen i Danmark, Norge og Island 1730–1814*.' BA Thesis (Copenhagen, 1972). p. 16.
- 34 E. Hreinsson: *Nätverk och nepotism*. pp. 108–117.
- 35 By this, I am referring to Gustafsson's statement from 1997, cited above. H. Gustafson, "Hugleiðingar um samfélagsgerð Íslendinga." p. 116.
- 36 *Lovsamling for Island*. I–XIX. (Copenhagen, 1853–1865).
- 37 *Lovsamling for Island* was published by the leader of the national movement, Jón Sigurðsson.
- 38 Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands. E.14. Ísleifur Einarsson – Danske Kancelli, 30.08.1804.
- 39 S. Dyrvik, *Danmark-Norge 1380–1814. Truede tvillingriker 1648–1720*. Copenhagen-Oslo, 1998), p. 168.
- 40 C. Ax, "De uregerlige. Den islandske almue og øvrighedens reformforsøg 1700–1870", p. 31. E. Hreinsson, "En premodern diplomatgerilla." pp. 103 ff.
- 41 E. Hreinsson, *Nätverk och nepotism*. p. 191.
- 42 Here cited in G. Hálfðanarson's translation. See G. Hálfðanarson, "Old Provinces, Modern Nations", pp. 46–48.
- 43 Ibid. p. 48.

- 44 Kong Frederik den Siettes allernaadigste Forordninger og aabne Breve fra den 16de Martii 1808, til samme Aars Udgang. Kiøbenhavn, s. 119–122. – <http://www.vigerust.net/adel/rangforordning1808.html> (25.06.2005).
- 45 Andreas Schytte, *Staternes indvortes regjering*. vol. 4. Copenhagen, 1789. p. 21. Here cited in P. Henningsen, “Den bestandige maskerade”, p. 314.
- 46 P. Henningsen, “Den bestandige maskerade”. p. 326.
- 47 Rigsarkivet Danmark. Rentekammer, 13.12-59. Embedsansøgninger 1660–1848; Rentekammer, 52.82-92. Norske afdelings Relations & Resolutionsprotokol. 1802–1812.
- 48 E. Hreinsson, “En premodern diplomatgerilla.” p. 120.
- 49 See, i.e. H. Gustafsson, “Hugleiðingar um samfélagsgerð Íslendinga.” p. 116.
- 50 C. Ax, “Et andet Island. Kulturel kompleksitet på Seltjarnarnes.” p. 272. The term “middling sort” has previously been used by i.e. Tim Harris and Roger Chartier.
- 51 E. Hreinsson, *Nätverk och nepotism*. pp. 240f.
- 52 M. V. Pedersen, *Hertuger. At synes og være i Augustenborg*. pp 22–25.
- 53 L. Björnsson, *Íslands hlutafélag, reksarsaga Innrétttinganna*. (Reykjavik, 1998), p. 65.
- 54 H. Finsen, *Gamle danske stenhuse i Island fra 1700-talet*. (Copenhagen, 1977), p. 17.
- 55 *Landsnefndin 1770–1771*. (Reykjavik, 1958), vol. 1, p. 284.
- 56 See i.e. H. Holland, *Dagbók í Íslandferð 1810*. (Reykjavik, 1992); W.J. Hooker, *Derð um Ísland 1809*. (Rv. 2000).

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