Power and Information

The Significance of Communication for Iceland’s Non-Persons and Social Elite

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The cover image dates from the early fourteenth century and is one of a number of instructional paintings known collectively as *Warning against Gossip* in St. Mary and All Saints Church, Little Melton, Norfolk.
Introduction
“Often the solitary one finds grace for himself...”

Wanderers are unpredictable, mysterious and lonesome. However, they are also a societal constant and an important and powerful force. Studies of medieval Icelandic history and culture have focused primarily upon the social elite but little attention has been paid to the wanderers, the lowest strata of society, those people who could be defined as non-persons.

For this project I have chosen to concentrate specifically on these non-persons and their function as information carriers in Iceland, especially as it relates to the power game of the social elite, the wealthy farmers and chieftains who vied for control of territory and resources. The classification of non-person includes obscure members of society such as shepherds (hirðir) and children (barn), but most prominently vagrants (gǫngumaðr), all of whom were often overlooked by their contemporaries, including the saga authors. This is not to say that they are unrepresented within the genre, but that they are treated as a form of stock character, unlike the socially elite heroes, who are treated as individuals. Rather than being discouraged by the lack of attention and detailed information within the sagas, the anonymity of this group has encouraged me to ask: Historically, who were these people and what was their place and purpose within their communities? I propose that non-persons acted as an indispensable channel of communication in medieval Iceland and that their role had consequences for the entire society. Although not necessarily acknowledged as such, non-persons were a truly powerful and necessary group within their communities.

State of Research
Iceland’s power game has been discussed for centuries. Subjects such as the influence of friendship and kinship and the importance of householding have all been recognized as factors affecting the position of the social elite. Even details such as the number of chieftains and specific chiefly traits, like generosity in friendship, have been studied extensively. However, the vital role of information in Icelandic personal and political relationships has not yet been included in this discussion. The formal settings where information would have been exchanged, such as the assemblies, have been very thoroughly discussed, yet the passing of information which occurred there has not been examined. Furthermore, and even more importantly, the unofficial channels of communication and the culture which surrounded them have not been considered by researchers. These informal and unstudied forms of communication would have made up the majority of information sharing, creating a constant

1 See Byock, 2001; Karlsson, 2000; Johannesson, 1974; Sigurðsson, 2005 and 2014.
2 Sigurðsson, 2005
3 Clover, 2005 (281)
flow of conversation throughout the year across every commune and social class. As the topic of communication and information in Iceland’s power game is as yet untouched, it follows that the Icelandic non-persons, and their role as information carriers, have also gone unnoticed. None of the main topics presented in this thesis are even mentioned in a thorough summary of saga scholarship from 1970 to the present, including the introduction of ‘new’ ideas, topics and approaches.² However, the lack of previous research has given me the opportunity to think independently and create my own opinions and ideas. It is my hope that the work done to create this thesis will improve the state of research and inspire further discussion within the study of the Icelandic power game.

Sources
Introducing ideas in a new area of study is interesting and exciting, however it is not without its challenges. Previous disinterest in the Icelandic non-person, as well as the role of communication in the power game of the society’s elite, has resulted in an absence of literature relating to either topic. It is for this reason that I have made a direct study of the Íslendingasögor episodes involving non-persons as well as the Grágás laws pertaining to vagrancy. Further investigation of Grágás, this time in regards to communication, along with an examination of the wisdom found in Hávamál, was used to expand on the cultural concepts and values presented in the sagas, especially those concerning interaction and relationships. These sources provide an excellent base for gathering information about the way Icelandic society regarded its lowliest members and demonstrate their function as communication channels. As well, they offer possible motivations for the behaviour of the sagas’ social elite and demonstrate the importance of information in the struggle for political power.

The Íslendingasögor, or the family sagas, describe events which are said to have taken place in Iceland during the tenth and eleventh centuries, they were, however, recorded anonymously during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These prose narratives have a particular focus on genealogies and family histories. There has been much debate about the source of these sagas. The Icelandic school, based primarily on the work of Sigurður Nordal, has traditionally maintained an interest purely in sagas’ literary sources with little consideration being spared for a potential oral background. Source analysts, on the other hand, have tried to look at the content and style of each saga individually. Although these researchers have found components that indicate an oral element, for example recurrent motifs and plot devices,³ in the sagas’ authorship it is impossible to know anything precise about oral culture at the time.

² Sigurðsson, 2005
³ Clover, 2005 (281)
of their creation. Dating sagas and assigning specific authors has also proven to be quite challenging. The oldest surviving fragments, pieces of *Egil’s saga*, *Eybyggja saga*, *Heidarviga saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, have been dated to the mid-thirteenth century although it is possible that some predate 1200. Source analysts have attempted to create a chronology of manuscripts with some difficulty caused by the homogeneity of the style and lack of definite authorship. The uncertainty surrounding the sagas’ origins has also created serious discussion about their historical merit. To what extent should these texts be taken as fiction and in what sense can they be interpreted as fact? I believe that, although the family sagas cannot be taken as factual histories which accurately portray real people and events, they do offer the reader insight into the culture that existed at the time of their creation, including personal and societal values. It is reasonable to believe that these sagas represent a society that was recognised and understood by their audience, therefore I suggest that they resemble the time period in which they were recorded more closely than the one in which the actual events are meant to have taken place. That being said, there would also have been many themes and details which could represent both time periods. The struggle for supremacy amongst the upper classes, the existence of outcast or dispossessed members of society and the desire to understand ones’ surroundings through access to information could all be classified as social constants.

Due to the scarcity of episodes involving non-persons, and with the hope of discovering as many variations as possible, I have employed examples from a variety of these works but *Njála*, with its wandering women, remains my most important saga source. *Njála* is one of the best known family sagas and it is also often referred to as the finest. It was recorded during the thirteenth century and survives today in sixty vellum manuscripts and fragments. For my thesis I have relied upon the 1975 English translation by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. *Gísla saga Súrssonar* is another family saga which I reference frequently. The outlaw’s story survives in thirty-three manuscripts and fragments, the earliest of which, AM

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5 Byock, 1988 (38)

6 Opinions on this subject have varied greatly over the years. See Clover, 2005 (239-315) for a thorough discussion of the various opinions on saga origins and an extensive bibliography. See also, Lönnroth, 1976 (165-204) for the social context of Njal’s Saga specifically, Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (9-31) for their summary of the historical context as well as the historical merit of the same saga, Harris, 1986 for his interpretation of the saga genre as a whole and Sigurðsson, 1999 (17-38); 2006 (1-15), Miller, 1990 (43-76), Knut, 2009 (571-609); 2011 (50-86) and Byock, 1988 (14-30) for a discussion on the reliability of laws and sagas as sources.

7 The most complete include: Reykjabók (AM 468 4to), c. 1300–1325, Gráskinna (GKS 2870), c. 1300 and with additions from c. 1500–1550, Móðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.), c. 1330–1370, Kálfalækjarbók (AM 133 fol.), c. 1350, Skafinskinna (GKS 2868 4to), c. 1350–1400, Oddabók (AM 466 4to), c. 1460

8 AM 162 b fol. β, c. 1300, AM 162 b fol. δ, c. 1300, AM 162 b fol. ζ, c. 1325, AM 162 b fol. κ, c. 1350, AM 162 b fol. γ, c. 1325, AM 162 b fol. θ, c. 1325, AM 162 b fol. η, c. 1350
445 c 1 4to, dates from approximately 1400. The earliest extensive text, in AM 556a 4to, is from the late fifteenth century. I use an English translation from 1866 by folk tale translator Sir George Webbe Dasent. I also make reference to episodes from *Egils saga Skallagrimssonar, Grettis saga, Laxdaela saga, Kormáks saga, Gunlaugs saga ormstungu, Eyrbyggja saga, Viga-Glumis saga, Bandamanna saga, Hrafnkels saga freysgoða and Þóðar saga hreðu*. It is my belief that the use of a wide range of sagas has enabled me to come up with a broader variety of examples of the behaviour and treatment of the Icelandic non-person, specifically vagrants and shepherds. I intend to use the content of these episodes to explore their role as information carriers and the possible ways that this written representation could reflect an historical reality. In the sagas, non-persons most frequently interact with members of the social elite, these characters being the primary focus of their authors; therefore, episodes involving interaction with non-persons also reveal a great deal about the motivations of their superiors, especially in relation to the subjects of power maintenance and the role of information. I will also use character descriptions and examples of the behaviour of the social elite in other contexts to provide further information on topics such as friendship, reputation and vulnerability, all of which are elements of the Icelandic power game.9

*Grágás*, the Grey Goose Laws, are believed to have been modelled upon the Norwegian Gulathing laws and brought to Iceland in the 920’s by a Norwegian named Úlfljótr. In 1262-1264, the Icelanders accepted the King of Norway as their overlord after which *Grágás* was replaced by new law codes, most notably *Jónsbók* in 1281. Two fragmentary volumes, the *Konungsbók*, GKS 1157 fol, from around 1260 and *Staðarhólsbók*, AM 334 fol, from 1280, are used to form a general unified idea of the laws. I have used an English translation prepared by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins which is based primarily upon *Konungsbók* with some additions from *Staðarhólsbók*. I have chosen to focus on *Grágás* rather than *Jónsbók* because it is the law code that was in use during the time when the *Íslendingasögur* are meant to have taken place as well as the period shortly before the sagas were recorded. I must admit that it is impossible to determine how closely the laws were followed and to what extent they merely represented an ideal reality. However, it is my belief that employing *Grágás* in conjunction with the sagas results in a more thorough representation of distinctly Icelandic culture and ideas. I will use the laws to illustrate the legal position, and therefore communal opinion, of vagrants as well as to investigate the legal attitudes surrounding speech and communication.

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9 I should note here that I intend to use the English spelling of Icelandic place and personal names in this thesis, but the Icelandic names of the sagas. My reason for employing English spelling is to maintain consistency with the citations I have taken from English translations. It would be confusing to refer to characters and locations by their Icelandic names in my own text and their English ones in the translated saga excerpts. However, for the sake of brevity I will refer to the sagas themselves by their much more concise Icelandic names.
I have also made use of Hávamál throughout this thesis to better my understanding of certain societal and cultural concepts. This collection of largely gnomic poetry survives in the thirteenth century Konungsþök, GKS 2365 4º, but some parts are believed to date from the tenth, or even ninth, centuries. As with the sagas, the authorship of this work is unknown as is an exact chronology of the additions or changes that were made before the earliest surviving manuscript was created. The name Hávamál translates as ‘sayings of the high one’ and the knowledge within the verses is attributed to Odin. The text offers its reader both practical instruction on how one should conduct oneself as a member of a community as well as more general observations on the values by which a man could measure himself and his manner of living. The pieces of advice most relevant to the current study are those regarding the creation and maintenance of friendship, especially in relation to meetings and conversation, as well as its importance for the human spirit. I will also look at verses concerning social graces and public behaviour. In the same way as the sagas, the contents of Hávamál are an indicator of the values and beliefs of the culture in which they were created and I intend to use them as such. These verses document the values and motivations of the social elite and help to explain the way that they are presented within the sagas. As for non-persons, the guidelines laid out in Hávamál demonstrate just how far this group deviated from the accepted social norms and how those around them would have interpreted their behaviour.

The Íslendingasögur, Grágás and Hávamál are invaluable resources and together they present an image of the general public opinion of non-persons, their mode of existence and the culture surrounding their treatment. Episodes which describe the values of the social elite, and those which offer examples of their interaction with one another as well as with non-persons, provide insight into their methods for obtaining information and how they used it to secure their political position. However, these sources can be difficult to deal with and do not provide enough detail to allow for a complete understanding of how people would have really behaved. It is for this reason that I have decided to make use of anthropological studies made in modern Newfoundland as both a guide and analytical tool. This method will create the opportunity to discuss possible functions and conditions of communication in medieval Iceland through comparison with thoroughly studied modern communities under similar conditions. Although, to my knowledge, this approach has never been taken, I strongly believe that it has the potential to aid me in my analysis and understanding of material from the Icelandic sources.
The Newfoundland Model

Examinations of Newfoundland in the 1960’s provided me with a model of a small insular community and helped me to understand communication in this type of setting. I chose to concentrate on two studies, one carried out by John Szwed in Codroy Valley between the years 1962 and 1963, and the other by James C. Faris in Cat Harbour during 1964 and 1965. Both of these men aimed to examine the social relationships of these ‘peasant’ societies and the results of their work, particularly that pertaining to information exchange, indicate a potential for strong similarity between the behaviour of the twentieth century Newfoundlander and the medieval Icelander. Szwed’s study of the Valley included 1800 persons, separated into nine sections, a division which they lived by, conducting most of their social interaction strictly within their own section. Cat Harbour’s population of 285 was essentially organised in the same way.¹⁰

An investigation of these communities clarifies the way in which information is shared within a small community and the effect this has on its residents. In many ways, the events of the sagas can be interpreted as exaggerated versions of the realities of these maritime societies. Throughout this thesis, I will use descriptions of the Newfoundlanders’ culture and social structure to support the legitimacy of comparison with medieval Icelanders, as well as specific examples of settings and conversations to assist in the analysis of comparable saga events.

In order to fully explain my decision to select the Newfoundland model for comparison with Iceland I will present some of the central aspects of their societies which coincide with one another, paying special attention to customs surrounding interpersonal relationships, communication and information sharing.

Political Structure

Szwed noted that the people of the Valley viewed themselves as very democratic; they were keen to preserve a community balance, saying “everyone is equal here and that’s the way it should be.”¹¹ This strong belief was reflected in their means of governance. The chief tool of government in rural Newfoundland was the meeting; all requests or protests were answered by the suggestion to gather together for a discussion.¹² These community meetings could be compared to the Icelandic assemblies which were accessible to nearly all members of the society. Although Iceland had greater social divisions than Newfoundland, there was a type of

¹⁰ Faris, 1972 (41)
¹¹ Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 84)
¹² Ibid, (Private Cultures, 100)
‘levelling’ process which resulted from the sharing out of property and the division of large land claims over time. As well, the wide dispersion of the population in Iceland gave people the opportunity for individual freedom.

One unique aspect of Newfoundland’s meetings, something not found within the sagas, was the custom of deciding the outcome of any decisions before the meeting actually took place. This was done through informal conversation between community members and prevented any public anger or embarrassment when the official meeting actually took place. In the sagas, legal matters are thoroughly discussed before they are taken before the court but success or failure cannot be determined until the case has been heard at the assembly. However, the goal of both the Icelanders and the Newfoundlanders was always to prevent conflict through public discussion and common agreement.

In Newfoundland the desire to avoid conflict was so strong that if an agreement could not be easily reached, it was very likely that a project would be abandoned entirely rather than create tension. The sense of democracy within Codroy Valley was founded more upon a communal fear of dissension than a love of equality. It is interesting to look at the sagas from the same perspective; the consequences of discord within a small community have disastrous potential and the intense interest in legal matters in, for example, Njála, betray an element of this same fear.

With this ideal of undisturbed democracy comes a strong pressure to conform to specific social ideals, not only in ones’ conduct during interactions but in the context of more general lifestyle decisions as well.

**The Importance of Family and Friendship**

Strict and complex social divisions were a central part of life and relationships with kinsmen formed the basis of other groups, for instance, dictating which men would fish together. The importance of establishing kin relations was expressed in the desire to marry local women. Kinsmen were essential for economic success, they fished together, combining their gear and efforts, and would hire one another in other business ventures. In Cat Harbour, the feeling was “once a stranger, always a stranger” and even those who married into a native family would never be fully accepted into the traditional familial relationships.

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13 Byock, 1988 (86)
14 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 109)
15 Ibid, (Private Cultures, 110)
16 Faris, 1972 (79)
17 Ibid, (83)
The people of Cat Harbour cultivated a deep distrust and fear of strangers, and members of the community took on the attributes of a stranger when they ceased to behave in a socially acceptable manner. For instance, one man was referred to as an ‘outsider’ when he began fishing alone, something extremely uncommon amongst the kin-oriented population. Similarly, another family’s decision to give up fishing and settle on a farm was both “a measure and a proof of [their] ‘outsiderness’”. Abandoning traditional group activities was viewed with suspicion. In many cases it was not enough to simply avoid antisocial behaviour, people had to actively engage in accepted cultural practices. Upon his marriage, a man was welcomed into the shop gatherings where information was exchanged but bachelors were excluded from these meetings. Not only did a wife provide a man with children, kinship and indispensable assistance at home and at work, marriage signified a man’s willingness to conform to social norms. By realising the common goal of settling down and contributing to the society, men earned the respect and comradeship of their fellows. Men who did not marry, or married into the community, were not fully accepted and generally suffered socially and economically as a result. This group often relied on doing small paid jobs for a merchant to survive, something which was believed by most men to have a detrimental effect on their status within the community.

The importance of personal relationships was also a defining factor in Iceland. Connections defined individuals’ identities and provided security, companionship and support. The subjects of Icelandic householding and friendship will be dealt with in further detail in Chapters 1 and 2 respectively. As in Newfoundland, strangers were generally regarded with a mixture of interest and fear. However, unlike Newfoundland, it seems that it was not impossible for strangers to eventually fit in by conforming to Icelandic social norms.

Culture of Isolation
A sense of separation, both internally and externally imposed, is pervasive throughout Szwed’s work on Codroy Valley. For much of its history, Newfoundland has been somewhat cut off from the rest of Canada, geographically as well as politically, only becoming part of the country in 1949. The feeling that they are a unique group remains to this day. One consequence of their late confederation was a delayed connection with the rest of society. In

18 Faris, 1972 (106)
19 Ibid, (125)
20 Ibid, (79) As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 this exclusion would have been a serious disadvantage to bachelors who, already lacking the communication channels provided by a wife and children, was also removed from the traditional information sharing methods employed by the majority of men.
21 Ibid, (120)
22 See Jakobsson, 2007 for examples of scepticism and dislike for merchants and missionaries from abroad and the marginalisation of foreigners.
1872, less than 100 years before Szwed carried out his investigation, the community had no governmental representation or provision for education, no civil law, no roads, carriages, wheeled vehicles or mail service,\(^{23}\) essentially, it was cut off from the rest of the world. A road to the nearest town was not completed until the 1950’s, at the same time the parish Council was still petitioning for the community to get electricity and improved reception of CBC radio programmes.\(^{24}\) The situation in Cat Harbour bore many similarities to that in Codroy Valley. The community’s high road was completed in 1961 and they were connected to electricity in 1963.\(^{25}\) According to Faris, for Cat Harbour’s residents, the ‘outside world’, of which they have only a very basic concept, began off the end of their peninsula.\(^{26}\) Although education was actually slightly better than in the surrounding communities, 16% of Cat Harbour’s adult population was illiterate, and a great many others could do no more than write their own names and read with difficulty.\(^{27}\) In previous years, five or six years of schooling had been the norm.\(^{28}\) The inability to effectively communicate using written information, combined with a history of illiteracy, would have created a persistent oral culture in the area. Faris recognised this tendency among the fishermen who transmitted information regarding landmarks orally. In this group, many of whom could not read or write, an extensive knowledge of these marks was a source of pride.\(^{29}\)

Just as with the medieval Icelanders, prolonged isolation resulted in an intense self-interest and the history and events of the Valley were considered to be of greater importance than information concerning the outside world. The inhabitants of the valley were given to recalling the lives of the ‘old people’, the original settlers of the Valley. Szwed writes that, “nearly every family has at least one member who knew a settler from his childhood and who can recite their sagas”\(^{30}\) and refers to a ‘Valley lore’.\(^{31}\) Similarly, Faris notes that the people of Cat Harbour, “keep alive stories of noteworthy schooners which came ashore as far back as 150 years.”\(^{32}\) There was also a strong oral tradition that the original settlers were fugitives and deserters; one local pirate who had died about 80 years earlier lived on in the community’s imagination.\(^{33}\) Time was often measured in terms of incidents involving deceased

\(^{23}\) Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 30)
\(^{24}\) Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 33, 135)
\(^{25}\) Faris, 1972 (22)
\(^{26}\) Ibid, (45-46)
\(^{27}\) Ibid, (14)
\(^{28}\) Ibid, (79)
\(^{29}\) Ibid, (29)
\(^{30}\) Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 23)
\(^{31}\) Ibid. (31)
\(^{32}\) Faris, 1972 (5)
\(^{33}\) Ibid, (9-12) See also, Tye, 1989 for her study on the interest in local characters in small town Nova Scotia. She also makes reference to the same information sharing traditions as are found in nearby Newfoundland.
patrikinsmen. Not only does this confirm the Newfoundlanders’ strong interest in their own history, it also indicates an important oral culture of information sharing.

The nature of a community dictates which information will be of interest to its residents. Both Cat Harbour and Codroy Valley were isolated and the people in each of these small populations were connected to one another by a shared history and current familial ties. The information which was most valuable to these people was that which fit into their own sphere of awareness and understanding. Faris notes that this distinction was even made between the genders in Cat Harbour, where women discussed matters of housekeeping but had little knowledge of fishing techniques, information which was extremely interesting to the men. The lack of interest in the outside world was also demonstrated by the unenthusiastic response to the community’s first television; the programmes contained no “culturally-significant news”.

The Icelandic sagas demonstrate a preoccupation with their own history. Landnámabók is perhaps the most prominent example of the Icelanders’ insular focus. This book describes the initial settlement of Iceland including genealogical and topographical details; its focus on historical commemoration is strikingly similar focus to Newfoundland’s oral remembrance of their old ones. Genealogies also feature prominently in the stories told within the Íslendingasögur where identity is constantly being linked with ancestry. Within the family sagas and Landnámabók, the introduction of an important individual is always accompanied by a lengthy list describing their lineage all the way back to one of the original settlers or perhaps even earlier.

**Differences in Settlement Patterns**

Despite the many cultural and societal similarities between Newfoundland and Iceland it is important not to overlook their differences. In terms of this thesis, the most important factor to take into account is the difference in settlement patterns because this would have had the biggest influence on communication.

The settlement of Iceland was dictated by its geography which was best suited to animal husbandry. Iceland’s economy centred on livestock such as cattle and sheep and therefore each farm required a significant amount of land in order to produce the requisite amount of

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34 Faris, 1972 (68)
35 Faris, 1966 (237)
36 Ibid, (243)
37 Meulengracht Sørensen, 1993 (25) In the same book there is also a brief but enlightening description of fræði: “Fræði or fröðileikr denotes – and may be translated – ‘knowledge of the past and of history,’ that is, of stories that are handed down and learned from generation to generation.” (107) This term could be used to identify someone with an expert knowledge of the past and is indicative of the tradition for passing on one’s own history.
hay for their livestock’s winter fodder\textsuperscript{38} as well as space for sheep to roam.\textsuperscript{39} This made it necessary for the population to spread out and settle on widely dispersed individual farms. There was never any need for the establishment of towns in Iceland, the population being too small and spread out to create the required concentration of wealth.\textsuperscript{40}

Newfoundland’s economy, however, was founded upon fishing and the population was divided into numerous small, compact and somewhat isolated villages by the water. Plots of land directly on the waterfront were particularly desirable which meant that houses were placed very close to one another in an effort to find a position as near to the water as possible. As mentioned previously, the villages under investigation in this thesis had populations of 285 (Cat Harbour) and 1800 (Codroy Valley). However, Codroy’s strict district divisions created actual communities averaging about 200 members each.

Many of Newfoundland’s settlements were extremely isolated, their primary form of contact with the outside world being the visits of merchant ships which could occur as rarely as two or three times in a year. Naturally, families and individuals within the small, tightly-grouped communities in Newfoundland would have found it easier to share information with one another on a regular basis. However, as will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3, social conventions created several barriers to easy communication. Although settlement in Iceland was much more diffuse than that in Newfoundland, it could not be said that people were significantly more isolated. Iceland’s economy was never self-sufficient and they too relied on trade with other countries, necessitating travel in both directions. It was possible for rich farmers to travel when and where they wished, both abroad and within their own land and it has been claimed that the absence of dialectical divisions in Iceland is proof of constant communication between different parts of the country.\textsuperscript{41} However, it should be noted that this type of free travel and communication was the privilege of certain groups within society, something which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{38} Carter, 2015 (40)
\textsuperscript{39} Meulengracht Sørensen, 1993 (18)
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, (18)
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, (17-18)
**Structure**

This thesis is divided into four chapters. In the first I will present the definition of a non-person and demonstrate how the term can be applied to various groups in Newfoundland and Iceland. Alongside saga examples of non-personage, I will include an analysis of *Grágás* laws pertaining to vagrancy and what they reveal about the society in which they were created. The focus of the second chapter is the connection between power maintainance and access to information. In this section I will introduce the various uses of information as a commodity and the opportunities that were created for non-persons to act as communication channels within their communities. I will draw on evidence from the sagas, as well as descriptions of Newfoundland, for my discussion of gender, mobility, knowledge, friendship and power. Setting and vulnerability are the main topics in the third chapter which includes examples, and a discussion, of how these factors affected information sharing in Iceland and Newfoundland. The final chapter is about the classification of information and the influence of social aspects such as gender and hierarchical position.
Chapter 1. The Non-Person Defined

Introduction
In this chapter I will attempt to define the term non-person and explain how it can be applied to the various groups of children, shepherds and vagrants. I also hope to provide a deeper understanding of the social perception of non-persons through a more thorough study of the legal description of Icelandic vagrancy. In order to achieve both of these ends, this chapter will be divided into two main parts.

In the first section, I intend to begin with a general definition of non-persons, elaborated upon using the specific example of children as non-persons in Newfoundland and the potential for the same classification of youths in Iceland. This explanation will be followed by further examples establishing the designation of vagrants and shepherds as non-persons within the sagas. Although these two groups are not represented in the anthropological studies which I refer to for information regarding children, I believe that a comparison can be made using the common thread of non-personage. Lastly, I will include a passage on the importance of names and what a byname or nickname, as well as a lack thereof, signified about non-persons and their communities. The second half of this chapter centers on the Grágás laws pertaining to dependency and vagrancy. These laws define vagrancy and focus on factors such as dependency, perversity, settled lodging and the prescribed treatment of male and female vagrants. It is my belief that an examination of these laws helps to illustrate the way in which communities understood the condition of poverty and its possible consequences, and therefore, an awareness of the society’s attitude towards a significant group of non-persons.

Non-Person Definition
A non-person is most basically defined as an individual whose existence is not recognized. Often this term is associated with a loss of rights, a person who is systematically ignored or concealed for political or ideological reasons. However, for the purposes of this work, the term will be used as it is in anthropological studies of communication, to represent those whose existence is beneath, or outside of, the notice of the general population. In this case, the position of non-person is not necessarily negative; it is not the result of deliberate discrimination but rather of naturally occurring social anonymity. It is also not intended to convey a sense of insignificance; it will become clear that non-persons played an important role within their communities, one which was directly enabled by this classification.
Newfoundland and Saga Children as Non-Persons

Both Szwed and Faris recognise children as non-person entities, although Faris does not use the precise term.42 Faris believes that the lack of a recognized personality was the reason that children were able to take on this identity. To adults other than their own parents children were a relatively anonymous part of the background.43 Except for close relatives and neighbours, most people would not know the names of children, even those of their friends, and children were rarely “regarded as social persons”.44 With the transition from childhood to adolescence, these young people became more self-conscious and guarded in their social interactions and were no longer considered non-persons.

It is worthwhile to consider whether children were similarly anonymous in medieval Iceland. Information on Icelandic childhood is regrettably rather scarce; although families and bloodlines are of central importance in the Icelandic sagas, they deal very little with young children. ‘Children’ generally enter the narrative fully grown and bearing adult characteristics. Rather than be deterred by this lack of information, one can interpret it as a possible indication of how children were perceived by their communities. One aspect of Newfoundland’s children’s non-person status is that they were not recognised as having individual personalities by people outside of their immediate families. Saga authors do not focus on children because they are indistinct characters who play no obviously significant role in events. Rather than confirming that children were unimportant, their absence may indicate that they were indeed non-persons in this society. The children mentioned in the sagas are most often members of the social elite and as such the future chieftains and wives of chieftains, people who could become saga heroes themselves. This would explain why they are being talked about in the first place and also why they portrayed in a positive light. These children are often described as veinligir (hopeful, promising, fine) indicating that they are not fully formed and that those characteristics which will define them as adults, although likely positive, are as yet unrecongnised. Particularly little attention is paid to female children who are often defined solely by the man they grow up to marry. An example of the introduction of children within a saga is found in Egils saga:

Skallagrim and Bera had a great many children…they had a son, who was sprinkled with water and named Thorolf. As a child he soon grew to be tall and was fair of countenance…Thorolf was far beyond children of his own age in strength. And as he grew to manhood he became doughty in most accomplishments then in vogue among those who were well trained…Early did he come to such full strength as to be deemed fit for warlike service with other men…Skallagrim and his wife had two daughters;

42 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 100) Faris, 1966
43 Faris, 1966
44 Faris, 1972 (76)
one was named Sæunn, the other Thorunn. They also were of great promise as they grew up. Then Skallagrim and his wife had yet another son. He was sprinkled with water and named, and his name was Egil. But as he grew up it was soon seen that he would be ill-favoured, like his father, with black hair. When but three years old he was as tall and strong as other boys of six or seven. He was soon talkative and word-wise. Somewhat ill to manage was he when at play with other lads.45

As members of a prominent family, Egil’s children receive more attention from the saga author and are described in greater detail than those from a less affluent or influential family would have been. Nonetheless, the daughters are simply listed as ‘promising’ and the boys are depicted in an oddly adult manner. Both sons are taller and stronger than other children their age and they reach adulthood quickly, Egil becoming talkative, aggressive and intelligent early on. Their exceptional traits are evidence of the brothers’ worthiness as saga protagonists, but their depiction also betrays a disinterest in children and the anonymity of childhood. Despite technically being members of the social elite, children such as these could have been considered non-persons by the saga author, at least until they acquired the distinctive traits which would define them as individuals in their adult lives.46

The sagas allow for speculation about the function of children as non-persons in medieval Iceland, but unfortunately they offer no very specific examples. However, it is possible to find numerous instances of Icelandic shepherds and vagrants actively fulfilling this role. Neither of these classes have been examined in anthropological studies of Newfoundland, it therefore becomes necessary to construct a comparison between the description of Newfoundland’s children and Iceland’s beggars and shepherds. This juxtaposition is possible because the definition of non-person includes all three of the subjects under consideration and accounts for a resemblance in their respective community functions.

45 Green, 1893 (CH 31)
46 Most works examining medieval childhood make reference to the influential theories of Philippe Ariès who believed that “a concept of childhood did not emerge until the early modern period” (Pollock, 1983 (1-21), Schultz, 1995 (2-9)). However, not only was his evidence based primarily on French society and culture, something which is perhaps less relevant for the current thesis, it has been strongly contested by other scholars in the field. It seems that the current consensus is that people did have a concept of childhood in the middle ages, albeit one which is often unrecognisable to us today. For information on the general Germanic perception of childhood and youth in the Middle Ages, see Schultz, 1995. Shultz’s study of Middle High German texts reveals a belief in people’s inherent nature and he discusses the early development of celebrated adult characteristics such as beauty and wisdom in the stories’ heroes and heroines. (44, 54-69) When considering the ideas of family and childhood it is also important to include hagiographical works. Many saints’ lives include details of the protagonists’ childhood experiences and the familial relationships. There are examples of saints’ connection with their children, for instance the famous story of Margery Kempe, see Pigg, 2005 for an analysis of her relationship with her son, as well as experiences of saintly children and their parents, see Tinsley, 2005 and Weinstein and Bell, 1986 (19-47). These exceptional children, like those that feature in the sagas, often display traits which are uncharacteristic for their age. An example provided by Tinsley from the vita of St. Nicholas describes him standing up at one day old, freely choosing not to breast feed, and later, deciding to “separate [himself] from the things that…young people took pleasure in” and go to church to learn the scriptures, a task which was even difficult for most adults. (233)
Vagrant as Non-Person

Vagrants were in a unique position outside of the accepted social structure. They did not have an identifiable occupation or recognized power and the undesirable, possibly even frightening, prospect of casual or unnecessary dealings with a beggar, someone unknown and unpredictable, would not have encouraged personal familiarity between vagrants and the general population. With no particular ties to any group and occupying the lowest level of the social hierarchy they lost their identity within the community, assuming a non-person position.

A main contributor to the non-person status of beggars was the absence of a network of family or friends. Because of their isolation there was no one who could dictate or be affected by their actions; they were connected to nobody, resulting in their classification as neutral entities. Although vagrants might have formed groups, these bands did not function in the same manner as a traditional household. To the general public it appears that one beggar was considered to be much the same as another and it seems likely that these wandering bands were largely indistinguishable from each other. The actions of one member do not seem to have reflected on the group as a whole, possibly because it would not have been possible to identify the other members. There would have been a natural fluidity in the composition of these companies who did not have any specific conditions tying them together, such as a place of residence or recognised kin relationships. In Njála the beggar women are not seen as individuals but as members of an unnamed group and there is nothing to indicate whether it is even composed of the same members each time it is mentioned.

Proof of vagrants’ non-person status in the sagas is rife. Not only in the way they are treated by the authors, generally as anonymous but useful bit-characters, but in the manner of their treatment by others. For instance, the unnamed beggar is never the source or object of any other characters actions or emotions. This is demonstrated in an episode from Kormáks saga:

…the Skíding brothers and Narfi paid a gangrel beggar-man to sing [an offensive] song in the hearing of Steingerd, and to say that Cormac had made it,--which was a lie. … Then Steingerd grew exceedingly angry, so that she would not so much as hear

Mollat, 1986 contains a broad discussion of the pauper in medieval Europe in which it is argued that the ambiguity of poverty resulted in suspicion of the underprivileged. Very little was known about those who lived as vagrants and Mollat believes that this created fear and mistrust: “Since they had fled their rightful place in society, might they not be rebels? Or disease carriers? Where they really poor, or genuinely ill?” (8) As well as fostering a perception of poverty as hostile to the established social order, this attitude served to construct a distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor, an idea which chimes with the Icelandic opinions regarding perversity in vagrancy. This work also introduces the theory that poverty affected people in three main aspects of life, regardless of location; the biological (poor health, uncleanliness, vulnerability to disease etc.), the economic and the social (loss of place in society and the means of labour). Although this thesis does not contain an exhaustive general discussion of poverty but rather a specific focus on evidence in the Icelandic laws and sagas, these three points can add another dimension in the general understanding of the condition of vagrancy.
Cormac named. When he heard that, he went to see her…Cormac said it was not true... “Who sang it in thy hearing?” asked he. She told him who sang it,--“And thou needest not hope for speech with me if this prove true.” He rode away to look for the rascal, and when he found him the truth was forced out at last. Cormac was very angry, and set on Narfi and slew him.48

Although the beggar man is described as a ‘rascal’ and violence against him is implied in Cormac’s discovery of the truth, it is Narfi who suffers punishment.49 It is noteworthy that Cormac’s anger is mentioned after his dealings with the beggar and that his rage is directed towards Narfi. For someone held in high esteem, such as Cormac, it would be beneath him, perhaps inconceivable for him, to be concerned with or offended by the actions of someone as lowly and unconnected as the gangrel beggar in this saga.

The anonymity of beggary is emphasised in Gísla saga where it figures as the key tactic in a murder plot. Helgi and Berg, the sons of Vestein, disguised in poor clothing and carrying beggars’ staves are charitably given passage by others on their way to the Thorkskafirth Thing. Having the appearance of, and travelling in the same manner as, beggars, they are welcomed by a group of vagrants in the beggar’s booth when they arrive at the Assembly. Accompanied by the vagrants’ leader the two boys approach another man at the gathering, Thorkel Soursop, and strike up conversation with him. The young lads use this opportunity to take Thorkel’s own sword and kill him with it before escaping into the woods as the rest of the vagrants flee in fear:

Now men flocked round Thorkel, and no man could tell who had done the deed. Bork just then asked what was all that stir or fuss down where Thorkel sate. He said this just as the fifteen beggars tore along by his booth...Now men run to Hallbjorn’s booth, and ask what it all meant; but all the beggars could say was, that two young lads had joined their band, and that they were as much taken unawares as anyone else, and hardly thought they should know them again.50

Although their identity is quickly guessed after the deed is done, Vestein’s sons are able to approach their enemy and enact revenge without arousing suspicion. As beggars, their individual identities are of interest to no one, not even their ‘fellow’ vagrants. And, were it not for Helgi’s careless remark: “I don’t know what they are mooting but methinks they are striving whether Vestein left only daughters behind him, or whether he had ever a son”51 it is very likely that they would have remained undiscovered. Although it may at first appear that

48 Collingwood and Stefánsson, 1902 (114-115)
49 The suggestion of injurious force should not necessarily be taken as evidence that Cormac was especially angry with beggar as the laws do not indicate that violence towards vagrants was unusual nor that it required serious provocation.
50 DeSent, 1866 (CH 15)
51 Ibid, (CH 15)
the ability of the vagrants to set up their own booth and interact with other assembly members would have resulted in a loss of their non-person status, in many ways it would have served to reinforce it. Setting all of the vagrants aside into their own booth further strengthens the idea that they are a totally separate and anonymous class, a group which remains outside of the rest of the community. This episode underscores the saga view of vagrants as non-persons and the use of their status by the saga author even suggests that it was something that people were consciously aware of.

**Shepherd as Non-Person**
Shepherds were not denigrated to the same degree as beggars despite belonging to the same category of non-persons and fulfilling similar functions within the community. Although they also wandered, their travels were a necessity and a signifier of their occupation, not the sign of a failure to conform. Most importantly, shepherds where connected with specific households and acted out of obligation to others rather than for personal gain.

The non-person status of shepherds is demonstrated in *Viga-Glúms saga*. Just as Vestein’s sons take advantage of the beggars’ identity to commit murder, Skuta takes on the role of the shepherd, perhaps in the hope that he would be ignored, but at the very least in order to be able to interact anonymously:

> Skuta…saw the men on their way. He thought it would not be good for him to meet them, so he made his plan, broke his spear-head off its shaft, handled this as if it were a pole, unsaddled his horse and rode bareback with his cape turned inside out, shouting as if he were looking for sheep.\(^{52}\)

Presumably, Skuta is known to these men, yet in the guise of a shepherd he becomes completely unrecognizable, even when the name he gives alludes to his true identity. Although the men are curious about his name it is apparently inconceivable to them that a supposed non-person could be anyone of consequence or that his individual identity is worth focusing on with any real intent. A parallel can be drawn between the two incidences of disguise; Vestein’s sons are also unable to stop themselves from hinting at their true identity and are given away, albeit slightly too late, by their hubris:

> Glum’s men overtook him and inquired if he had seen any man fully armed riding over the hill? He replied that he had seen one. “What is your name?” they asked. “I am called,” he says, “Plenty in the Myvatn country, but at Fiskelæk people call me Scarce.” They answered, “You are making sport of us”; but he said he could not tell them anything truer…and so he parted from them... Glum’s people came up to him and told

\(^{52}\) Head, 1866 (CH 16)
him they had met a man who had answered them with a jest... “You have made a blunder”, said Glum; “it was Skuta himself that you fell in with.”

The men’s disinterest in the shepherd’s identity is further emphasised by how easily they give up trying to guess his riddle and although they believe that he is ‘making sport’ of them they do not feel the need to react; a shepherd is too far beneath them to cause offense or spark real interest. Under normal circumstances it might seem unusual for a person to tease someone who is unquestionably their social superior, however, as a non-person a shepherd’s actions are of little consequence and he is able to behave in a way which would be unacceptable for anyone with a unique identity or recognized societal relationships.

The term for staff features frequently in the various terms used to define vagrancy and it is interesting that in this episode, as well at the aforementioned instance of assuming the disguise of a vagrant, the staff is specifically mentioned. In transforming into a shepherd, Skuta’s first action is to break his spear and create a staff and Vestein’s sons are described as carrying staves which identify them as vagrants. Normally the saga style does not allow for unnecessary detail and this would suggest that the staff was a convention, a symbol which was immediately recognised by the audience to mean ‘shepherd’ or ‘beggar’, or, as the purpose of a staff is to assist one in walking or climbing, more broadly ‘wanderer’ and therefore, although perhaps not consciously, ‘non-person’. Thus the symbol of the vagrant and the shepherd is also the symbol of movement and anonymity.

The Significance of Names
A final point of significance in the discussion of the non-person is the treatment of names. Faris pointed out that Newfoundland’s children who carried out tasks assigned to non-persons were not known by name, while the names of post-adolescents who had become too self-conscious to perform these same activities, were known to the entire community. Although this detail may appear trivial to the modern reader, it had serious implications in the small, family-oriented communities of Newfoundland.

An indication of the insular nature of Codroy Valley, as well as the centrality of personal relationships to the community, was their extensive use of nicknames. Many inhabitants of the Valley shared the same family names and the confusion that might have resulted from using these common names was allayed by the custom of identifying people by the names of their relations or by nicknames. Men’s names were linked to those of their fathers, and, if necessary their grandfathers, for example ‘Angus Archie Dan’ and women may have had their

53 Head, 1866 (CH 16)
54 See the section entitled Vagrancy Defined in the second half of this chapter.
55 DaSent, 1866 (CH 15)
husbands’ names linked to their own. Nicknames including a name and a unique characteristic or occupation were also employed, for example, ‘Red Tom’ or ‘Woods Johnny’. These names call to mind the saga method of identifying people by their fathers’ names, as well as the frequent use of descriptive nicknames.

Medieval Icelanders traditionally named their children after deceased relatives which resulted in a decreased supply of first names and the same possibility for ambiguity created by the lack of family names in Newfoundland. Nicknames helped to dispel this confusion, but more importantly, they are a demonstration of the insulated nature of the community and the centrality of family relationships. As in Newfoundland, there was exclusivity created by the use of nicknames and bynames, they would have been meaningless to an outsider who lacked the information necessary to form an understanding of the familial or historical connotations. Thus, they are the result of a society which revelled in discussing and referring to its own history and inhabitants.

The use of familial relationships as identifiers illustrates the importance of the family and the way in which its general reputation could be applied to each individual member. The reputation of person whose name was constantly paired with that of a father, grandfather or husband was undoubtedly affected by the connection. In this light, it is easy to see why conduct in social interactions became especially important; it was not only a reflection of self, but the representation of a group. This type of byname is also an indicator of the need felt by Icelanders to identify individuals through their relationships with others.

Another method by which individuals were described was through a connection with a specific place such as their farm and, therefore, the household which they were attached to.

56 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 60)
57 Bandle, 2002 (749)
58 As noted by Diana Whaley, the majority of saga nicknames are not explained to the reader and when considered in isolation much of their meaning may be lost. For instance, she gives the example of Helgi inn magri from Landnámabók. His nickname marks him as someone who is thin and it is easy to assume that it was inspired by a naturally slim physique. However, further reading would reveal that, according to tradition, he received his name from his aggrieved parents when they discovered that he had been poorly fed during his fosterage in the Hebrides. (Whaley, 1993 (129))
59 The enduring connotations of a nickname are also emphasised by the Grágás law forbidding anyone from giving someone a name which they did not have before. Persons doing so risked lesser outlawry should the subject of their invention decide to take the matter up with the courts. (Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (196)) It should be noted that this law was probably not strictly followed and it appears that, curiously enough, men were often willing to tolerate demeaning nicknames (Peterson, 2015 (115)), yet its existence does demonstrate a recognition of the nickname’s influence on perceived social identity. Further discussion of the Grágás laws concerning speech can be found in the final chapter of this thesis.
60 Peterson, 2015 (3). See also, Willson, 2007 and Hale, 1981 for a discussion on the continuing use of nicknames and bynames in modern Iceland.
61 Ibid, (8). An example provided by Peterson is Alviðrukappi which means ‘champion of Alviðra’. In Landnámabók this byname is assigned to Alviðrukappi Þórðarson Þorkell, Alviðra is the name of a farm in Dýrafjörður (Westfjords). (127)
Just as with family names, place names as bynames represent the significance of belonging in Icelandic medieval culture.

These aspects of naming, by personal relationship or by settled lodging, help to illustrate the figure of the vagrant as it was perceived by the medieval Icelander. The majority of wanderers are nameless, and the even the few male beggars who are named do not have family names or nicknames which refer to another person. Having no known familial connections or association with a household, wandering beggars could not be defined in this traditional way and their names are evidence of their unnatural position within society.

It would appear that in the case of shepherds, their existence as wanderers and non-persons took precedence over their connection with a household, at least as far as names were concerned. There are instances where named characters take on the guise or the work of a shepherd, but under ordinary circumstances ‘genuine’ shepherds are not identified as individuals. An example of the awareness of their anonymous condition is found in the previously mentioned episode where Skuta disguises himself as a shepherd and makes a riddle of his name. Although he is not actually a shepherd, when he gives his false name it is a single word and no family name is expected.

Saga children may be somewhat of an exception to the rule of the nameless non-person. Their names are known to the reader as they are members of the social elite and the saga authors include them because they are being mentioned almost as if they were already adults. However, this does not disqualify the possibility that the names of Iceland’s children, especially those of the lower orders of society, could have been unknown to their communities.

It is also worth briefly mentioning the lack of women’s nicknames within the sagas. Unlike the Newfoundlanders, women were never identified by their husband’s names, instead they could have been given a byname based on their father’s name or the farm or household of which they were a member. They were also occasionally given nicknames which referred to their appearance or a remarkable aspect of their personalities. However, there is an overall lack of female nicknames in the sagas. This may of course be due in part to the relative scarcity of women but it is still interesting to note that in E. H. Lind’s collection of Old Norse personal names and bynames, only 3% belong to women.62 The ambiguity of female individualism implied by this statistic furthers our understanding of women non-persons and their lowly and anonymous status, below even that of male non-persons. It also gives an

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62 Of the 3 616 total bynames recorded in the collection, 3 505 (97%) belong to men and only 116 (3%) are assigned to women. (Peterson, 2015 (105))
impression of the attitude towards all women, including those who were members of the social elite. The issue of gender is relevant throughout this paper and it comes to affect even the powerful housewives who feature most prominently within the sagas.

For both vagrants and shepherds the lack of a name, particularly a family name may represent the loss of something which was considered very valuable by their society. However, it could also have worked to their advantage. Not only did the absence of a name represent their obscurity, it also separated them, and their deeds, from any identifiable group, giving them the freedom to act without affecting others. In a society so strongly focused on familial history and connections, the nameless occupied a very unique and unrestricted position.

The representation of the non-person within the sagas demonstrates a clear, if occasionally unconscious, understanding of their position within their communities. However, a fuller comprehension of this often quite mysterious group can be achieved through a study of the laws relating to the lowest order of society, the dispossessed poor.

**The Grágás Vagrant**

Most of the individuals within the previously mentioned non-person groups would naturally have occupied a low position in their communities, but none lower than that of the vagrant. However, their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy provided beggars with unique opportunities making them perhaps the most important group of non-persons. In order to more completely understand the social perception and treatment of vagrancy it is helpful to look at official legal documents concerning the condition. Although it must not be assumed that these laws were strictly followed, they do give the reader an impression of how vagrancy was defined and what restrictions and assistance were considered to be acceptable by the general population.

**The Dependency Laws**

The Grágás laws pertaining to vagrancy and the maintenance of dependents confirm that this impoverished class did exist within medieval Iceland and that they were a part of contemporary Icelandic social consciousness. The rules concerning the treatment of vagrants could be interpreted as exceedingly harsh by modern standards, however the content of the dependency laws indicate the clear goal of precluding the poor from becoming vagrants in the first place.\(^{63}\)

\(^{63}\) A general discussion of the Old Germanic character of Norwegian and Icelandic poor relief laws can be found in Stein-Wilkehuis, 1982. The author describes the way that these laws demonstrate the cultural importance of family and community as well as the social and economic circumstances which resulted in their creation. See also, Pederson, 1999 for the historical background of the Grágás laws, details about the administrative structure of the hreppr and his interpretation of the Icelandic dependency laws as outstanding ‘strategies of care’ centuries
The Icelandic \textit{hreppr} were tasked with looking after their communities’ inhabitants.\footnote{For the legal description of a commune see Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (185) They were responsible for making sure that no one within their jurisdiction became destitute, for instance, by assisting those who had experienced misfortunes such as loss of property.\footnote{See Sigurðsson, 2008 (18-26) for a discussion of the various distinctions made between types of people and positions in Icelandic society. It is important to remember that there were significant differences in the degree of prosperity experienced by various people, even amongst people who were theoretically members of the same social class. This economic stratification was present amongst the farmers as well as the elite and there would have been farming families for whom destitution was never far off.}}\footnote{Pederson also recognizes the extreme nature of the legal censure of vagrancy. Finally, Lárusson, 1960 can be referred to for a general overview of the Icelandic laws and legal system.} They were responsible for making sure that no one within their jurisdiction became destitute, for instance, by assisting those who had experienced misfortunes such as loss of property.\footnote{Meulengracht Sørensen, 1993 (34)}\footnote{Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (192)} To protect people from economic ruin they could attempt to force them to take on work and to regulate the size of the settlement.\footnote{Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (40-41)}\footnote{Ibid, (34, 40-41)}\footnote{Ibid, (40)} Despite their best efforts it was inevitable that some individuals were unable to take care of themselves, these people took on the status of ‘dependant’ and became the responsibility of their closest relative with the means of supporting them. Although the dependant was under the care of a specific person or persons, they were also considered to be a charge of the commune as a whole. It was expected that everyone be connected to a specific commune; in the case of dependants this could be established as the place of their relatives’ residence.\footnote{Ibid, (40)} Their community was then responsible for their welfare and whatever action was needed to enforce the legal decisions that had been made concerning the dependant’s maintenance.\footnote{Ibid, (34, 40-41)\footnote{A passage from \textit{Njála} is enlightening in terms of the legal position of dependants: “Eyjolf them named the witnesses – ‘to testify that I disqualify these two men from the jury…on the ground that they are dependants and not householders. I deny you the right to sit on the jury…’” (Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 142, p305)) If it was possible to ban dependants from taking part in legal procedure then it would have been especially important for settled householders to help them maintain their rights.}}\footnote{Ibid, (34, 40-41)}\footnote{Ibid, (40)}\footnote{“The men of the commune are not to let the dependant become a vagrant: they are to deliver such a dependant to him.”} The \textit{Grágás} lawmakers presumed that some of those adjudged to be responsible for dependants would try to shirk their duty by leaving them in the care of someone else or even fleeing the county.\footnote{Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (40-41)}\footnote{Ibid, (34, 40-41)}\footnote{Ibid, (40)} If this did occur, the men of the community were charged with delivering the dependant to his caretaker or forbidding his journey out of Iceland.\footnote{Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (185)} These laws specifically identify vagrancy as the fate of those dependants who were abandoned, and place the responsibility for preventing it with the entire commune.\footnote{Ibid, (40)}\footnote{“The men of the commune are not to let the dependant become a vagrant: they are to deliver such a dependant to him.”}

There is also evidence that the poor and homeless were to be helped only within their own district and that all available aid should go exclusively to those from within the community: “Men have no right to board vagrants from outside the commune and if they do they incur a
penalty of three marks...” 72 It is worth noting that these strict rules appear to be for the protection of the community and not the dependants themselves. Vagrants created a burden on the entire society whereas dependants were, at least financially, the responsibility of their own kin group alone. In creating Grágás, the Icelanders were not attempting to safeguard people against the hardships or vagrancy, they were working to free themselves of the economic problems that such people created.

Vagrancy Defined
If the laws designed to protect dependants failed or perhaps if a dependant was unwilling to accept the charity of his kin the result would have been destitution and legal vagrancy. Grágás sets out the definition of, and penalties for, vagrancy thusly:

If a man moves about on pointless journeys within a Quarter for half a month or more, the penalty for it is a fine, and similarly if he does it for a month in all and leaves the Quarter with no purpose except to relieve his own household or the one he is attached to. If a man moves about and accepts charity for half a month or more and takes night lodging where he can get them, he is a vagrant. If a man turns into a tramp – a healthy man and so able-bodied that he could get a lodging for a whole year if he would do the work he is capable of – his penalty is full outlawry, and it is lawful to summon him to the place where he is last known to have spent the night and call nine neighbours of the place of summoning to the assembly... 73

A vagrant is a person without a settled home, and therefore no householding relationships, or regular work who travels from place to place and lives by begging. 74 They are associated with laziness and antisocial and unpredictable behaviour. Gongumaðr, the legal term for a vagrant in Old Norse refers to the perverse vagrant, one who is able but unwilling to work, preferring to wander and beg for their keep. However, this is not the only manner in which beggary can be defined, and several terms for vagrancy and its various associated activities appear in the sagas: 75

farandkona (-maðr/-sveinn/-karl) (roaming) beggar, landloper
flokkunarmaðr vagrant, landloper
gongumaðr (-kona/-sveinn/-karl) (roaming) beggar, landloper
brautingi vagrant, landloper
húsgangr begging from house to house
húsgangsmáðr/-kona beggar going from house to house
reikunarmaðr vagrant, roaming beggar
stafkarl/-kerling beggar
stafkarlaðetr “beggars’ runes”, „Gaunerzinken“

72 Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (187)
73 Ibid, (135)
74 OED definition of ‘Vagrant’
75 These terms and definitions are found in Irlenbusch-Reynard, Michael, 2005
stafkarlsbúningr/-gervi  a beggar’s appearance
stafkarlstígur  a beggar’s usual track; vagrancy
umrenningr/umrennandi  vagrant, landloper; (later:) marauder

All of these terms stress the necessity of movement as a vital part of the vagrant identity. For instance, the affixes –gangr, gongu- and -gangs- are all forms of the verb ganga meaning ‘to walk’ or ‘to go’ and the prefix staf- is from stafr ‘a staff or a stick’, something which was often used while walking.76 There is a strong emphasis on motion, specifically on journeying by foot, walking over long distance with the assistance of a stave. However, there is no impression of purposeful movement or action with intent; vagrants are ‘landlopers’ and roamers, simply wandering from one house to the next without any perceptible motive beyond begging. Although not all of these terms indicate that every beggar is work-shy, it is unlikely that their society maintained a strong distinction between beggars who were unwilling to work and those who were incapable of doing so.

**Perversity**

Grágás protected the poor by attempting to avert beggary. However, once this state was entered, the laws became harsh and extremely limiting and they seem to imply distrust of the helpless and unattached. As in the above definition of vagrancy, the idea that vagrants were to blame for their situation, or, at least, that they should be suspected of such guilt, comes through in the term Ómennska (perversity): “It is perversity if a man or a woman goes as a vagrant from house to house because of indolence or such other failings as make good men unwilling to have them.”77 Vagrants considered to be perverse lost their right to inheritance and personal compensation, as did their heirs. The laws did allow for slightly gentler treatment of people who had become vagrants because of ill health or age. Men who fell into this category were allowed personal compensation, but they would have had to give one-third of their settlement to whoever took the matter to court for them.78 Even in a situation where beggars were being given an opportunity to participate in society, it was by proxy and came at a cost. As well, even if an individual was too old to work it could still be decided that they had become a beggar of their own free will, in which case they were considered perverse and lost the previously described right to compensation.79 No exceptions to these harsh rules were

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76 Definitions of ganga and stafr found in Zoëga, 2004. Interestingly, the example selected to illustrate the use of stafr is “ganga við stafr” (to walk with a staff).
77 Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (52)
78 Ibid, (243) Vagrants who were not perverse could theoretically represent themselves at court but only if the person elected to do so for them failed to appear. The laws are not entirely clear on this matter but it seems that most often it was necessary even for these types of vagrants to find a third party who was willing to take their case. The success of vagrants who chose to take a court case themselves seems unlikely, especially as they would have been without the support of powerful friends, an advantage which was heavily relied upon by the social elite.
79 Ibid, (8)
made for women, who would have found it more difficult to find employment while pregnant or caring for infant children. Most of the laws concerning vagrancy begin with the assumption that the people in question are perverse. Any leniency towards involuntary vagrants was not extended to children of beggars; they lost the right to inheritance whether their parents were considered perverse or not.  

**Vagrants at the Assembly**  
If the *Grágás* laws were followed faithfully it would have been extremely difficult for vagrants to join the gathering at the assemblies, the largest and most important social and political event in Icelandic society:

> No one is to give food to vagrants here at the assembly. Men are not to let their booths stand open at mealtimes in order to do so. If vagrants come in at mealtimes and beg for food, then those who own the booth must get men to turn them out, and even though they are turned out with rough handling, they have no right to redress as long as no lasting injury is done them. But if people give them food the penalty is lesser outlawry. The penalty is also lesser outlawry for the man who owns the booth if he does not get his men to turn them out. Booths of vagrants who beg for food at the General Assembly have no immunity in case of damage. If men try to defend their booths, the penalty for each of them is lesser outlawry, and moreover those who shield them fall with forfeit immunity if injury is inflicted on them. If vagrants have goods in their possession men may take every bit of it off them if they want to. If men lend goods of theirs to vagrants or hand them over to them on hire to bring to the assembly and then that property is taken off them, there is no claim to that property. The only property men have the right to claim even when it has been taken off vagrants is property they have stolen or other property which came into their possession without the consent of the man who was rightly responsible for it.  

Despite the fact that their condition alone would have been sufficient grounds for preventing vagrants from taking part in the Assembly, the harshness of these laws show a desire to make it impossible for them to even attend. By cutting off any recourse to food or shelter it seems that the goal was to make the assembly a place where vagrants could not survive, thereby forcing any who did wander to the meeting grounds to move on quickly. Vagrants were not allowed to beg, nor were others allowed to offer them charity, and by giving people the right to confiscate their possessions it also made it difficult for vagrants to trade goods for room and board. The laws forbade beggars from defending themselves and if any type of rough treatment was admissible, surely they did nothing more by attempting to attend the assembly than put their persons and their property in danger?

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80 Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (8)  
81 Ibid, (40)
However, the obstacles presented in Grágás notwithstanding, it would seem that some vagrants found it worth their while to risk setting up their own encampment at the assembly. There is mention of a beggar’s booth in Gísla saga, but the purpose of their attendance at the assembly is unclear.\(^\text{82}\) Certainly their presence appears to be tolerated but there is no indication that they are participating in anything beyond casual social encounters. In this case the booth has been created by Halbjorn, a sort of vagrant leader, who has the ability to offer food and lodging to other beggars. The law states that men were not to feed or shelter vagrants and they were discouraged from giving them goods, but the beggars in this saga appear to be self-sufficient and perhaps this is why they are permitted to stay. The condition allowing for the possibility of hiring items to beggars suggests that the existence of beggars with their own means was not an impossibility. However, it is likely that the very poorest of beggars, or those without connections, would still have been ostracised and regardless of the potential for vagrant bands to have a presence at the assembly they were not allowed to actively participate.

Most often, vagrancy disqualified one from acting as a principal in a lawsuit,\(^\text{83}\) excluding those with the reasonable grounds of ill health and advanced age mentioned above. These rules created yet another barrier between vagrants and the rest of society, something which would have been particularly difficult in a country which was strongly culturally invested in laws and the legal process. This would have increased the vagrants’ insecurity and contributed to a feeling of exclusion from their communities. Already without consistently reliable sources of food and shelter, beggars could not have felt protected by the law. Would the gongumaðr have been loyal to a community which did not care about them? Throughout the sagas the beggars sow discord without any apparent regret; perhaps this is because they were not personally invested in a society in which they were not permitted to take part.\(^\text{84}\)

**Movement and Boarding**

Hávamál instructs a guest to: “Depart again on his way, nor stay in the same place ever; if he bide too long on another's bench, the loved one soon becomes loathed”.\(^\text{85}\) If even a beloved friend or kinsman should be wary of outstaying their welcome, what does this verse say about the attitude held towards a lingering dependant or vagrant?

\(^\text{82}\) DaSent 1866, (CH 15)
\(^\text{83}\) Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (243)
\(^\text{84}\) In this context it is interesting to compare the treatment of vagrants with the ‘outsiders’ of Newfoundland (mentioned earlier in The Newfoundland Model). Their inability to participate in society put them in a unique and generally unenviable position, however, it may also have created an unwillingness to take part in normal social behaviour. As Faris wisely points out: “...sanctions of the behaviour of citizens only hold meaning as ‘long as one seeks the rewards of membership in the local community…” (Faris, 1972 (106)) It is important to consider that some of these ‘outsiders’ may have been unconcerned by society’s disapproval or neglect and turned it into something personally advantageous.
\(^\text{85}\) Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2006 35
The laws concerning vagrancy and dependency carried with them the supposition of a rather nomadic existence. Dependents were protected from being unnecessarily uprooted and could not to be moved into a “commune other than the one [they] should be in” without their maintainers accruing a fine. The necessity of the laws preventing the movement or abandonment of dependants indicates, however, that they were not always a welcome addition to a household and remained in danger of being moved on if possible. For instance, it was acceptable to ‘shuttle’ dependants between two communes for maintenance should the heirs of their dependency live in different areas. The laws did allow men to board itinerants who were travelling to their next place of maintenance, suggesting not only that such movement occurred frequently, but that dependants would not necessarily have received any assistance from their maintainers while traveling.

One of the key aspects of vagrancy was a movement from house to house, this action being used on several occasions within Grágás to define the state of being itself. The necessity of travel should not come as a surprise given the meagre charity beggars could legally expect from each household:

If people with no second cousin or closer kinsman in settled lodging are without maintenance, then all the men in the country are required to give them such board as was just prescribed for the others, [that is, a meal at suppertime and breakfast on holy days]. Houseroom is not to be given to vagrants for whom boarding is not prescribed and no presents made to them except material for shoes and clothing. And for all deviations from this article, whether people are given worse board or better than prescribed, then the penalty is lesser outlawry.

Excessive charity and charity bestowed on a beggar from outside the community were prosecutable offences. An addition to this law makes the prohibitions against beggars even more apparent: “Men are to give board to no vagrants from outside the commune and not give them food in quantities large or little - they may give material for clothing and for shoes if they wish...” Here it is especially clear that the few items a beggar was able to receive were not a requirement but an optional form of charity. The prosecution of anyone who broke the rules regarding boarding was the responsibility of the community. However, if the commune prosecutors failed to act, the Bishop was expected to find someone willing to do so, from outside the community if necessary. If a man was appointed by the Bishop to prosecute but refused to carry out his duty he would have been liable for lesser outlawry. The lengthy description of steps to be taken above the community level authority demonstrates the

86 Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (40)
87 Ibid, (186)
88 Ibid, (192)
89 Ibid, (266)
importance of these rules to the entire society, and quite possibly, the tendency for people to break them. The increasingly stringent measures taken to prevent this type of transgression could indicate that people were generally willing to turn a blind eye to any breaches of boarding laws. There is also evidence within the sagas which suggests that beggars received more than just the bare minimum of clothing. In Njála the gongukona who report to Bergthora are confident that they will be given a reward\(^\text{90}\) and beggar men are compensated for delivering messages.\(^\text{91}\) If men such as Halbjorn and his band of vagrants were really able to establish themselves at the assembly they would have had have access to an outside source of either food or items valuable enough to be traded for it.\(^\text{92}\) The sagas also include incidences of wanderers staying the night at a farm, for instance, Njála’s Huckster Hedinn sleeps at Hrut’s home with the rest of the men\(^\text{93}\) and a vagrant in Þórðar saga hreðu, mentions the residents of a house where he had “slept…last night”.\(^\text{94}\)

**Treatment of Vagrants**

Unfortunately it was beggars who were liable to suffer when these boarding rules were broken. Shockingly, one way in which the perpetrator was apparently able to redeem themselves was by beating the very beggar who had benefited from their generosity:

> Where men are prosecuted in some matter to do with giving people board… then it is a legal defence if men take vagrants and give them a thorough flogging. That will be legal even if other householders join in flogging the same man. The defence is to be deemed valid in all suits arising from offences they had previously committed before the flogging took place…the vagrants counted here as liable to flogging are those for whom boarding is not prescribed.\(^\text{95}\)

If violence towards a vagrant could be legally prescribed it is easy to imagine that people would not have been concerned by their more general mistreatment. This law in particular adds a feeling of helplessness to the condition of the medieval beggar, a feeling which is strengthened when one reads about the penalty of lesser outlawry for allowing a dependant to die out of doors, essentially as a vagrant.\(^\text{96}\) Although the penalty is not light, it is certainly not the most severe and the fact that this law was considered necessary in the first place is troubling. For the most unfortunate and unconnected beggars, death would never have been far off.

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\(^\text{90}\) Magnusson, Pálsson (CH 44, p115)
\(^\text{91}\) For example, Collingwood and Stefánsson, 1902 (114-115) and Hollander, 1949 (CH 2, p155)
\(^\text{92}\) DaSent, 1866 (CH 15)
\(^\text{93}\) Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 22, p78)
\(^\text{94}\) Coles, 1882 (Thórðr Hreða, CH 9)
\(^\text{95}\) Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (192-193)
\(^\text{96}\) Ibid, (34)
Settled Lodging

In Newfoundland it is not customary to ask another person where they are from or where they were born, but rather, where they “belong to”.\(^97\) Even after moving or marrying, people still ‘belonged’ to their original home for the rest of their lives. A similarly strong connection to the idea of an unchanging home is found throughout Hávamál. This text reiterates the importance of one’s own home and the shame and sorrow associated with homelessness and begging: “One's own house is best, though small it may be, each man is master at home; with a bleeding heart will he beg, who must, his meat at every meal”.\(^98\) The beggar has debased himself, removed from the position of ‘master’ he has lost control of the means of his own survival and must rely on the uncertain charity of others. Contrary to the idea that people would voluntarily become beggars, Hávamál suggests that vagrancy was a source of great unhappiness and humiliation.

The state of being alone and uncared for, something which must have been the case for a great many beggars, is similarly distressing: “The pine tree wastes which is perched on the hill, nor bark nor needles shelter it; such is the man whom none doth love; for what should he longer live?”\(^99\) This verse expresses the emotional vulnerability of a man without friends or family and also hints at his weak social position; he is without recourse to physical assistance.

The vagrancy and dependency laws are an indication of the centrality of householding to the medieval Icelandic view of society.\(^100\) The concept of holding ‘settled lodging’ was valued culturally and connection to a household was the most important aspect of personal identity. When foreigners moved to Iceland, they remained on the periphery until they had married and set up a house.\(^101\) In the same way, vagrants only received the rights of their society once they re-entered it in a conventional manner, by joining into the accepted system of households.\(^102\)

Settled lodging also formed and defined the basis of many legal distinctions involving inheritance and the maintenance of dependants. Those without a permanent home may have had fewer expectations placed upon them but they also enjoyed fewer rights. Settled lodging

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97 Dictionary of Newfoundland English (38-29) definition of ‘belong’. See also, Chiaramonte, 1970, “Newfoundlanders speak of themselves as ‘belonging’ to the community where they were born and raised.” (5)
98 Bray, 1908, verse 37. Verse 36 is similar: “though he have but two goats and a bark-thatched hut, ‘tis better than craving a boon”
99 Ibid, verse 50
100 “In theory every individual was attached to a household; every householder was attached to a chieftain. Through householder and chieftain everyone was attached to an assembly. The chieftain and the members of his assembly–third gave each other mutual support.” (Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (3))
101 Householding was the channel through which people were able to take part in their society and maintain a sense of security and belonging. See, Sigurðsson, 1995 for an explanation of the Icelandic focus on householding, personal relationships and alliances. Also, Miller, 1988 for his theories on the complex nature of householding and descriptions of the various members belonging to each household.
102 Jakobsson, 2007
103 Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (8)
was held as a requirement for men to be called as a member of court\textsuperscript{103} and for the children of vagrants to inherit\textsuperscript{104} or become eligible for maintenance.\textsuperscript{105} If a man wished to send someone else to make a payment on his behalf, it was not required that the settlement be accepted if he did not have a home and personal property.\textsuperscript{106} One defence for a breach of an aforementioned boarding regulation, boarding someone from outside the community, was that the accused man believed the illegal boarder had a settled home.\textsuperscript{107} Naturally, those without lodgings would likely be the ones most in need of boarding, but it is interesting to see that even amongst poor travellers, a settled home was something which could be expected and that it was held as a precondition for assistance. This also indicates that there was an important division in the social hierarchy, even at the lowest level, between vagrants and the housed poor, even though they could apparently be similar enough to be mistaken for one another.

Having a settled home was also a condition which determined how men were permitted to behave towards women. For instance, if a man lay with a free woman who had a settled home he was liable to full outlawry.\textsuperscript{108} This scenario, as with a great many others, was considered to be a summoning case which required that: “[nine neighbours] of the place of action, if it is known…be called, but otherwise [neighbours] of his home. It is further lawful to call neighbours of the woman's home if neither of the other places is known.”\textsuperscript{109} The same requirements could not be applied to a vagrant who, without a place of residence, could not be said to have any neighbours. The frequent necessity of calling upon neighbours in \textit{Grágás} could be one reason that vagrants were not allowed to act as the principle in a legal case; perhaps it would have been too difficult to create laws which conformed to both the traditional Icelandic legal process and their unique situation. These laws illuminate the medieval Icelanders concept of community, what they considered normal and abnormal for their fellow citizens or, at the very least, what was considered to be valuable and acceptable. The lack of a permanent home or employment was essentially what defined a vagrant and in many instances the cultural and legal emphasis on settled lodging automatically disqualified beggars from participating in society.

\textsuperscript{103} Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (286-270) 
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, (8) 
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, (52) 
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, (156) 
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid, (189) 
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, (70) 
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid, (70)
**Female Vagrancy**
As difficult as the life of a male beggar could be, that of a female vagrant was more so. Children, for instance, would have created an additional burden on female vagrants. Although vagrants were not held responsible for the maintenance of other family members they were expected to take care of their own offspring. Children were not eligible for maintenance by a kinsman if their parents were vagrants who moved from house to house because of perversity. This ban could be lifted only if both parents had fulfilled the requirement of one year’s settled lodging or if one was in a settled home and the other could prove that they are unable to earn their keep. However, if either parent returned to vagrancy then their child was no longer the lawful responsibility of their kinsmen and could be delivered to the wandering parent to be cared for by them instead.\(^{110}\)

Icelandic law required individual people to take responsibility for prosecution and punishment. However, if a beggar woman had no one willing or able to take up her cause she would have been powerless to act. There are various laws pertaining to unlawful sex with vagrant women and they state that “the case lies with anyone who wants it”\(^{111}\), but it seems unlikely that these women would have been able to find anyone willing to take up their cause. The law also specifically states that there was no legal penalty for a man who admitted to intercourse with a vagrant woman. Denial could result in personal compensation if the case was dealt with at the assembly, however, it is difficult to imagine that the accusations of a beggar woman, if they were even taken seriously, would have resulted in a legal case. If a man did acknowledge his actions then he could be charged with fathering a child and would have become responsible for the mother’s care until the child arrived and she was recovered from her pregnancy. Refusal to do so was punishable by a fine, the recipient of which was not the mother, the one who was most greatly wronged by the breach, but the person who had taken up the case on the woman’s behalf and helped to support her.\(^{112}\) There is no explanation of the expectations placed upon the father after the mother’s recovery period or any description of how her recovery was to be defined. If a man did not wish to maintain the mother of his child it is possible that they would both have been turned out.

If a man slept with a vagrant’s wife, presumably also a vagrant, then the punishment was the same as for intercourse with other men’s wives, assuming of course that the husband was able to actually collect this compensation or to find someone willing to help him do so. This law, although perhaps not always effective, emphasises the especially low position of the female beggar, far below even that of her equally impoverished husband. Unattached beggar women

\(^{110}\) Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (52)
\(^{111}\) Ibid, (70)
\(^{112}\) Ibid, (70)
had no recourse to such compensation. In order for the gongukona to have any worth or protection they needed to be legally attached to or assisted by men.113

Interestingly the matter of consent is not dealt with in the laws concerning vagrants, but it is of primary concern in the laws regarding behaviour towards other women. Secretly kissing another man’s wife was an offense “whether she [allowed] it or whether she [forbade] it”.114 Although it does not affect the penalty in this case, the mention of female acquiescence here demonstrates that it was a distinction of which the lawmakers were conscious. There was also a marked difference in the penalty for men who ‘asked’ women to sleep with them, lesser outlawry, and those who attempted to ‘force’ them, full outlawry. In general, stricter punishments were enforced if the women ‘took offence’. For instance, kissing a woman in private accrued a fine of three marks, unless she was offended by it, i.e. was unwilling, in which case the punishment becomes lesser outlawry.115 This increased penalty puts kissing an unwilling woman on par with kissing someone else’s wife. Unlike the powerless unattached gongukona, other women were able to take responsibility for a case and were permitted to prosecute or assign a legal administrator to do so for them. These women could depend on the legal system to defend them and were able, even expected, to take action themselves. This is in comparison to beggar women, for whom the concept of ‘taking offence’ was not even considered possible and for whom participation in the legal system relied entirely upon the voluntary help of men, something that they could only hope for, not personally secure.

Given the relatively minor penalties, all monetary, for intercourse with an unattached female vagrant and their lack of access to legal recourse, it is easy to imagine that the gongukona were frequently mistreated. In addition to harsh restrictions placed upon all vagrants, female beggars had to cope with laws that were discriminatory and uncaring to women. These disenfranchised women were in a particularly precarious and unprotected position in Icelandic society.

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113 For further discussion of the potential motivation behind legal restrictions on marriage and sexual activity, particularly that between men and women of different social standing, affluence or ability, see Jochens, 1995 (19-32) It is her belief that the primary aim was to safeguard personal property rather than to protect the vulnerable.
114 Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (69)
115 Ibid, (69)
Conclusion
The figure of the non-person appears in both Newfoundland and Iceland, most significantly represented by the groups of children, shepherds and vagrants. An examination of anthropological studies made in Newfoundland and episodes found within the Íslendingasögur reveal similarities particular to these two cultures, most notably the way that names, and the lack thereof, can inform the character of the non-person. The factors which defined the non-person reveal those aspects of life which their communities believed to be valuable; the settled lodging and recognisable personal relationships which represented security and belonging as well as the fulfillment of natural human needs.

The insight provided by the literary accounts found in the sagas is tempered by information concerning the legal treatment of vagrancy. Looking at both of these sources is especially interesting because the sagas and Grágás do not always agree. For instance, the seeming impossibility of vagrants at the assembly expressed in Grágás is countered by the mention of their own booth in Gisli’s saga\textsuperscript{116} and the low expectations created by the boarding regulations are frequently contradicted by examples of householders extending generous hospitality to wanderers. The contrast between the societal ideals expressed in the laws and the conflicting evidence found in the sagas also helps to remind the reader that there would have been stratification in the vagrant community and that assumptions should not be made and applied to the entire class as a whole. The ability of Hallbjorn and his followers to position themselves at the assembly independently, while the laws indicated that other beggars were forced to beg at this type of gathering, demonstrates that there was not only one type of vagrant experience. That a named vagrant leader could exist shows that not all beggars were equally poor or alone. However, the laws do indicate that the general opinion of vagrants was extremely low and that they could expect little voluntary assistance.

When considering the type of contradictory evidence found in the legal and literary sources, it is difficult to determine which is closer to the truth. Although it could not be said that either the sagas or the laws provide us with an entirely accurate depiction of the society in which they were created, it is reasonable to expect the sagas would have had to present a reality which was recognizable to their audience. This is not to say that the laws are without value, they still represent the ideals and goals of their society as well as providing examples of the acceptable behaviour including the punishments for vagrancy which were presumably considered to be just.

\textsuperscript{116}DaSent, 1866 (CH 15)
The content of this chapter serves to define the non-person and to provide evidence of the obstacles they faced. However, it also shows that their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy was not as restrictive as it may at first appear. All of the groups discussed in this chapter fall under the general classification of non-person but it is important to recognise that there were distinctions even amongst this lowly and anonymous group.

In the following chapter these distinctions will be explored further and the potential for non-persons to take on an important role within their communities will be revealed.
Chapter 2. Power, Information and Mobility

Introduction

Information was a requirement for the social elite to maintain their power; it was something that could be traded in friendship, used to inform their counsel and to create a reputation for wisdom and knowledge. However, in spite of their wealth and influence, it was not always easy for powerful men and women to acquire the information they relied upon and it was often necessary for them to employ non-persons as communication channels. Due to its value as a tool in the political game of Iceland’s elite, information took on the traits of a commodity and was traded between people from the highest and lowest levels of society.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first, I begin with an overview of the connection between access to information and the maintenance of power. A steady flow of information was necessary for the social elite to cultivate and sustain a reputation for knowledge, something which was of the utmost importance for both men and women in Iceland. The second section of this chapter focuses on the concept of information as a commodity. I intend to expand upon this idea through an analysis of the ways in which information is used as a commodity in friendship, its necessity in the giving of good counsel, another important aspect of friendship, and the connection between informed counsel and power. As well, I will include a discussion of information as a commodity to non-persons with specific attention paid to its use as a trade-good by vagrants. The final section of this chapter centers on mobility and how the limited access to information experienced by certain groups created opportunities for non-persons to act as messengers and purveyors of news. This segment will include an examination of gendered mobility in Newfoundland and the connections between movement, personal relationships and access to information, as well as the use of non-persons as channels of communication and their role as defined by the theory of face-work. Finally, I will conclude with examples of children in Newfoundland and shepherds and vagrants in Iceland being used as information carriers because of their non-person status.

The Social Elite: Knowledge and Power

Until the twelfth century, membership in a hereditary lineage was not a requirement for becoming a godi (chieftain, priest). Only a certain number of men could hold this position, and at least theoretically, it could be assumed by anyone with sufficient ambition. In order for the Icelandic social elite to maintain, and possibly to increase, their power in a

117 Refer to Sigurðsson, 1999 (39-54) for a summary of the debate surrounding the exact number of chieftains. Scholars have argued for numbers ranging from as low as 36 to as high as 70 or 80.
118 Byock, 1988 (11). See also, Sigurðsson, 1999 for his discussion on the instability of the chieftaincies during the Commonwealth period, including the often brief life-span of these positions and the possibility for creating new chieftaincies. (56-61)
decentralised society they would have had to make use of every available resource. The most important of these resources was information, something which gave them the ability to understand and react to their surroundings, take up lawsuits and sustain friendships. Access to channels of communication would have been invaluable for powerful men and women.

Although most decidedly not a member of the social elite, the ability of information to elevate its possessor is perhaps best illustrated by the, admittedly very exceptional, example of the beggar Hallbjorn. As a vagrant, Hallbjorn occupies the lowest strata of his society; the effect of information is therefore especially distinct in his introduction as a proud and influential man:

There was a man named Hallbjorn: he was a vagabond who roamed over the country, and not fewer men with him than ten or twelve. But when he came to the Thing he built himself a booth… He said he will find room for everyone who asks him prettily. “Here have I been,” he said, “every year for many a spring, and I know all the chiefs and priests.” The lads said they would be very glad if he would take them under his wing and teach them wisdom. “We are very curious to see mighty folk about whom great tales are told.” So Hallbjorn says if they will go down with him to the seastrand, that then he would know every ship as it ran in, and tell them all about it.¹¹⁹

Although Hallbjorn remains a vagrant, he holds a certain degree of power, at least amongst his peers, based on his knowledge which includes familiarity, even an implied relationship, with ‘all the chiefs and priests’. He is the leader of several other beggar men and feels that his position and understanding lend him a certain prestige; he demands respect from those who would lodge with him and takes pride in what he has learned from long experience with the Thing. The information he has gained is clearly a source of vanity and something he takes pleasure in both sharing and being known for. Hallbjorn’s knowledge and access to information have made him into something of a vagrant chieftain and he even imitates the upper classes by constructing his own booth. It is also noteworthy that the character of Hallbjorn represents one of the few named vagrants within the sagas. He remains a non-person and has no family name, yet he is distinguished in some ways from the rest of his band of beggars. As well as having access to information at the Thing, and possibly from the aforementioned chieftains and priests, it is reasonable to expect that he also used his followers as a communication channel and a source of information.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ DaSent, 1866 (CH 15)
¹²⁰ See Byock, 1988 (6-7) and Sigurðsson, 2008 (90-92) for evaluation of the possible opportunities for social mobility. As well, Vésteinsson, 2007 includes details regarding stratification within the social pyramid and the limitations on chieftains’ power created by the territorial nature of their authority, including the potential for shifting loyalties amongst their followers.
If information was the foundation and the key to a mere beggar’s proud status amongst his fellows, it was exponentially more important to the social elite who had significantly more to lose should they be cut off from communication.

The position of a member of the social elite without a news source was precarious. *Laxdaela saga* provides us with an example of what could happen to even the most powerful members of society when they were cut off from their channel of communication with the outside world:

Bolli’s shepherd went early that morning after the flocks up into the mountain side, and from there he saw the men in the wood as well as the horses tied up, and misdoubted that those who went on the sly in this manner would be no men of peace. So forthwith he makes for the dairy by the straightest cut in order to tell Bolli that men were come there. Halldor…saw how that a man was running down the mountain side and making for the dairy. He said to his companions that “That must surely be Bolli’s shepherd, and he must have seen our coming; so we must go and meet him, and let him take no news to the dairy.” They…overtook the man, picked him up, and flung him down. Such…that the lad’s back-bone was broken. After that they rode to the dairy…Bolli had been early afoot in the morning ordering the men to their work, and had lain down again to sleep…

In this excerpt the positive role of the shepherd as information carrier is emphasised, he is perceptive, loyal and efficient and therefore very valuable. He notices the men, immediately determines that intentions and makes his way towards home ‘by the straightest way’. When he is spotted, it is simply as a ‘man’ but he is identified as a shepherd by his actions, namely his movement, and as such he poses a threat. There is a very clear relationship in this passage between the non-person, movement and news. There is also recognition of the power of information demonstrated by the severity of Halldor’s actions, he violently ‘breaks’ the channel of communication. When his shepherd is killed Bolli loses an integral connection with his surroundings and therefore access to important information. Thus when his enemies arrive he is caught off guard, his helplessness emphasised by his position; Bolli is completely unaware of his surroundings as he is asleep in bed. This episode demonstrates in a very obvious way the immediate connection between access to information and the maintenance of power. It also shows how heavily the elite relied upon non-persons despite their apparent lowliness and unimportance.

In another saga, *Gunnaugs saga ormstungu*, Gunnlaug returns from abroad to find that his betrothed, Helga, had married his enemy during his absence. The man who informs him of this development states that he “was anigh at the Thing when [the matter] was settled last summer” and it is clear from other passages within the saga that this information was well

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121 Press, 1880 (CH 55)
122 Morris, Magnusson, 1901 (*Gunnlaug*, CH 12)
known to all who attended and that the news was carried throughout the land. While he was away from home, Gunnlaug lost contact with his usual channels of communication and the result was personal disaster. Even if he had not been present at the Thing himself, this information would have reached him had he been in Iceland with normal access to information. Not only did the marriage constitute a victory for his rival, it also robbed Gunnlaug of his chosen bride and the advantages he could have gained through an alliance with her and her family. One curious aspect of this story is Gunnlaug’s failure to send word home. Having stayed away for more than three years and broken his half of the betrothal agreement it would seem logical for Gunnlaug to try to contact Helga or her father, she was after all the most beautiful woman in Iceland! Is it possible that Gunnlaug attempted to do so but was unsuccessful? Perhaps without a direct link to communication channels within Iceland itself, messages sent from abroad might not be received. Gunnlaug’s misfortune demonstrates how damaging a lack of contact to the communication network could have proven for the social elite.

**The Reputation of Knowledge**

Having access to information was of the foremost importance but it was also necessary to know what to do with it. Wisdom is underlined throughout the sagas as an extremely desirable characteristic; but what is the connection between knowledge and wisdom? Simply being wise was not enough, one had to have the ability to give good advice, to take knowledge and turn it into advantage and create the best possible outcome. Conversely, innate intelligence, although an admirable quality, is rendered useless without access to information. The description *vitr* (wise) was very commonly applied to elite men and women and was treated as one of the most important traits a person could possess. Connections within different communication channels would have been needed to maintain a reputation for possessing wisdom.

The powerful men of saga tradition were expected to have a variety of good qualities; the introduction to *Njáló’s* *Hrut* provides the perfect example: “Hrut was a handsome man; he was tall, strong and skilled in arms, even-tempered and very shrewd, ruthless with his enemies and always reliable in matters of importance.” Similarly, Snorri Priest is described thusly in *Eyrbyggja saga*: “…little men knew of his thought for good or ill; he was a wise man, and

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123 For a discussion of the qualities which Icelanders expected of, and attributed to, their leaders, see Sigurðsson, 2011 (72-88). This article focuses on generosity and wisdom, however, the importance of information has been overlooked.

124 Magnusson, Pálsson,1975 (CH 1, p39) The same passage translated by George W. DaSent uses the terms ‘wise’ and ‘counsel’ specifically: “Hrut was handsome, tall and strong, well skilled in arms, and mild of temper; he was one of the wisest of men - stern towards his foes, but a good counsellor on great matters.” (DaSent, 1861 (CH 1))
foreseeing in many things, enduring in wrath and deep in hatred; of good rede was he for his friends, but his unfriends deemed his counsels but cold.”

It is interesting how closely these accounts resemble one another. For both of these celebrated heroes, the association between masculinity, wisdom and good counsel is strongly emphasised. Men were able to use their wisdom to earn respect and gain friends as well as in the taking up of lawsuits and governance of their households.

Although most instances where information has an immediately obvious effect involve men, communication was also extremely important to powerful women. It was common for women within the sagas to be associated with wisdom, indeed in the descriptions of especially respected women, wisdom is shown to be among the most prized female virtues. As Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir points out, the description veðn ok vîtr (beautiful and wise) is often applied to women whose wisdom is never actively demonstrated but the frequent use of this phrase indicates the value accorded to female intelligence. Female wisdom was very often expressed in relation to men, how they could use their knowledge to the advantage of their male relations. When searching for a suitable wife the necessity of wisdom and prudence prevailed over the more traditionally valued trait of female beauty. There was a suggestion that women were more attuned to social nuance and were able to warn men of the suspicious behaviour of a potential enemy, or advise them on how best to secure a friendship. Women were expected to give good counsel and act as faithful confidantes, eyrarúna (a friend into whose ears secrets are confided). It could be said that there is an aspect of selfishness in the assistance provided by these Icelandic women as their power and standing depended heavily on the reputation of their families, something they were often unable to influence without acting through a male. In order to preserve their honour it was important for them to have the ability to advise their husbands, brothers and sons. Women also desired knowledge for reasons beyond the motive of personal self-preservation. By working together to collect information, men abroad and women at home, it was possible for couples to work as a team to improve their social standing. A good example of this is found in the relationship between

125 Morris, Magnusson, 1892 (CH 15)
126 Friðriksdóttir, 2013 (26)
127 Ibid, (26-27)
128 Jesch, 1991 (187) Refer to for a more general description of the place of the housewife within society and her responsibilities to her family and her household.
129 See Chiaramonte, 1970 for his observations regarding the importance of the husband-wife relationship in Deep Harbour, Newfoundland. When he asked men who they would go to if they had a problem and needed someone to talk to, the first answer in every case was that they would speak with their wives. When he then asked what they would do if their wife were unavailable, for instance, if she were in hospital, the men were hesitant and many said that they would wait until she came back rather than choose someone else, even hypothetically. (17) Not only does the men’s choice emphasise the importance of the household it also places emphasis on the
Bergthora and Njal. It is clear that Begthora considers herself to be Njal’s equal, at least in matters concerning their home and their family and it is reasonable to believe that they discussed information together as equal parts of a single unit.\textsuperscript{130} The idea that men should be the ultimate beneficiaries of information does not decrease the value of female knowledge nor their necessity for communication.\textsuperscript{131}

For both genders, information led to wisdom and, with it, not only the ability to effectively navigate their society and manage their affairs but also to earn respect and to cultivate a good reputation.\textsuperscript{132}

**Information as Commodity**

The importance of information to the social elite gave it value and established it as a commodity. This concept is best described by Rusnow and Fine. They consider the process of social exchange to function in the same manner as a marketplace and demand for information is greater during periods of “high collective excitement…[when] …emotional needs, attitudes, and values come into play.”\textsuperscript{133} Just as in a marketplace, news carries a different value based on supply and demand, and during times of increased excitement, “…the demand for information will be greater than what can be offered.”\textsuperscript{134} Furthermore, they argue that under such conditions there is a “…relaxation of conventional norms governing communicative behaviour.”\textsuperscript{135} Their observations can be applied to communication within the sagas.

**Information as a Commodity in Friendship**

The importance of friendship in Iceland, most especially for powerful men, cannot be overemphasised; it has even been argued that the bonds of friendship trumped those of kinship.\textsuperscript{136} In the discussion of the Icelandic power game, friendship must be defined not only as personal but political. Everyone was joined together in a system bound by loyalty,

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\textsuperscript{130} Bergthora says, “I am Njal’s wife...and I have as much to say in hiring servants as he.” (Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 36, p101)) She is as much involved in, and responsible for, the success of the household as her husband. The affection between them and their concept of themselves as a unit is also represented in their choice to die together. Bergthora is given the opportunity to escape before their house is burned but says: “I was given to Njal in marriage when I was young, and I have promised him that we would share the same fate.”(Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 129, p267))

\textsuperscript{131} Scott, 2002 uses the example of the Grágás law which details baptismal rights in the absence of a priest to demonstrate his idea of “the man who does and the woman who knows”. This law decrees that it must be a man who baptises a child but that if he does not know the words or actions then a woman is permitted to teach him. This rule illustrates the way in which women were expected to help men to use their knowledge rather than doing so themselves. (227) This law can be found in Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2006 (25).

\textsuperscript{132} See also, Friðriksdóttir, 2013 and Psaki, 2002 for their opinions on female counsel in the Riddarsögur.

\textsuperscript{133} Rusnow and Fine, 1976 (35)

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid (35)

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid, 1976 (35)

\textsuperscript{136} Durrenberger, Pálsson, 1999
generosity and mutual obligation, which provided people with a sense of security and an understanding of their place in society.

A type of contractual friendship could be established between householders and chieftains; the chieftain relied upon his householders for support and they entrusted him with their personal safety.137 In the same way, friendship between equals provided the security necessary for the social elite to maintain their power and successfully navigate the political power game. In the following sections I will focus on the latter form of friendship, that between men of equal status as it is the one which features most prominently within the sagas.

In order for the social elite to maintain their friendships it was imperative for them to take part in gift giving.138 It was customary for men to demonstrate their goodwill by presenting one another with gifts, creating a culture of reciprocal generosity, each gift required a counter gift which was at least as fine, if not more so. Grágás laws governing gift giving demonstrate the social expectation that when a gift was given, an equal of better gift was required in return: “If a man makes a gift worth twelve ounce-units or more to someone...and...the gift is not returned to half its value, then he has the right to claim his gift if the other dies”.139 In this way, gifts may be regarded as a form of investment; they were not given simply out of kindness but in the expectation of some form of return.

The subject of friendship and the methods by which it is maintained, are treated extensively in Hávamál: “With raiment and arms shall friends gladden each other, so has one proved oneself; for friends last longest, if fate be fair who give and give again”.140 This verse suggests that fine clothing and weapons make appropriate offerings but the idea that information could be exchanged in the same manner as a physical gifts is also explored within Hávamál.141

The exchange of advice is a key component in many male saga friendships and Hávamál places a strong emphasis on the connection between friendship, gifts and communication. For instance: “Hast thou a friend whom thou trustest well, from whom thou cravest good? Share

137 Sigurðsson, 2008 (78-84); 2010 (31-36)
138 Ibid, (87-90); 2010 (25-31); 2013 (43-62)
139 Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (28)
140 Bray, 1908, verse 41
141 In Sigurðsson, 2013: “According to Hávamál, a gift both symbolised and displayed friendship. In Iceland the most common gifts were weapons, horses, oxen, jewellery, clothes, and fabrics. There were fixed rules about which items could flow upwards and downwards in the system. Weapons, for example, usually symbolised power and only those in positions of power could donate these and then only to people lower down the social pyramid.” (51) It does not appear that there were any restrictions on the direction that information as a gift could travel but it would be interesting to investigate this subject further.
thy mind with him, gifts exchange with him, fare to find him oft”.142 Frequent discussions necessitate frequent visits, stressed as an important element of friendship, which naturally strengthen and sustain relationships.143 Talking over news, sharing and creating common opinions is a bonding experience. This verse also links sharing one’s mind with gift giving as equally important methods of exchange; essentially the two are linked as interchangeable offerings. Furthermore: “To his friend a man should bear him as friend, and gift for gift bestow, laughter for laughter let him exchange...”,144 once again conversation, in this case denoted by laughter, is represented as a token of exchange which is encouraged to reinforce friendship.

**Counsel as a Commodity in Friendship**
Conversations between male friends often centred on a discussion of personal matters and the dispensing of advice. Counsel forms the foundation for numerous interactions and *heilræði* (good advice) acts as a gift in the friendship culture of exchange. Of course, in order to give advice one first needs knowledge and information on which to base it. For instance, if a man sought a friend’s advice in relation to a legal case, that friend would need a thorough understanding of the situation and the people involved in order to give good counsel.

An example of a friendship where counsel acts as the most important gift is that between Njal and Gunnar. Their bond is maintained by Gunnar’s frequent visits to obtain Njal’s *heilræði*.145 Their discussions also make a marked connection between the level of friendship and the quality of advice: “…Gunnar said, ‘I have come to you for some good advice.’ ‘I have many friends who deserve good advice from me,’ said Njal. ‘But for you I think I would try hardest of all.’”146 Njal connects friendship and counsel but also makes sure to reserve his most valuable gifts for his greatest friend.

Further proof of counsel’s value as a friendship commodity is the strength of the relationships formed through its exchange. Taking counsel together connected people in the eyes of their community; an individual who exchanged counsel with a powerful member of society had a portion of their influence extended to them, both through access to a superior source of information and through society’s recognition of their bond. *Egils saga* provides us with some interesting examples of how counsel created recognized relationships in the same way that

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142 Bray, 1908, verse 44
143 Ibid, verses 34, 118
144 Ibid, verse 42
145 For more information on the importance of gift giving and the friendship between Njal and Gunnar specifically, see, Sigurðsson, 2010 (58-61)
146 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 21, p75)
physical gifts did. For instance, King Harold Fair-hair’s persecuted not only Skallagrim, his anger extended to those people he was connected to as well:

He also sought diligently after those men who had been in the counsels or confidence or in any way helpers of Skallagrim and his folk in the deeds which they wrought before Skallagrim went abroad out of the land. And so far stretched the enmity of the king against father and son, that he bore hatred against their kith and kin, or any whom he knew to have been their dear friends.147

In the above passage, counsels and confidence are the only specified means of assistance, presumably marking them as the most important. It is also implied that this was a measure by which a relationship could be determined as close and ‘active’. In another episode, Egil enquires whether a man “…had acted on his own counsel…or had the support of others more powerful.”148 Offering support was an act of friendship and something that friends and kinsmen relied on each other for, perhaps most prominently in legal cases, but presumably in all aspects of life. In this case, support, often connected with tangible monetary or physical assistance, is synonymous with advice.

**Counsel and Power**

Befriending a wise counsellor would have had its advantages. These men, and potentially also women, would have been a source of information as well as guidance. Njal is well known for being wise and ready to give good counsel: “His advice was sound and benevolent…he remembered the past and discerned the future, and solved the problems of any man who came to him for help”149 For Njal to provide counsel it was first necessary that he know the details of the case at hand, therefore, those who visited him for advice inadvertently become sources of information. In turn, access to this information and its potential benefits became available to his friends. A man who was wise and powerful need not seek out news as it would be brought to him.

It is natural to assume that those requiring assistance with important matters would look for the advice of someone like Njal, who was known for his good counsel, and in doing so, they provided their advisor with the opportunity to dictate the outcome of their decisions. Not only would this have been a significant advantage in maintaining personal power, it would also have provided a counsellor with the information necessary for him to offer informed and valuable advice. Therefore, a reputation as a knowledgeable advisor gave one the ability to affect politics.150 One good example of this is *Egils saga* in which kings often call upon their advisors.

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147 Green, 1893 (CH 30)
148 Ibid. (CH 56)
149 Magnusson, Pállsson, 1975 (CH 20, p74)
150 This connection is also illustrated by assembly customs. At the Althing chieftains sat on the middle bench at public meetings while their advisors sat on the inner and outer benches. In this way the chieftains were able to
counsellors to discuss important matters which affect the entire land.\textsuperscript{151} To be the king’s trusted counsellor offered political advantages and those in this position could be rewarded with gifts and titles. Not only this, it provided such men the information and influence necessary to maintain their positions and pass them on to their descendants.

\textit{Njála} provides the reader with another example of the advantages available to a counsellor. After the battle at Rangriver, the “[news] of these events spread far and wide, and many said that they had happened no sooner than expected. Gunnar rode to Berghorsknoll and told Njal about the killings.”\textsuperscript{152} This passage indicates the spread of news but also, more importantly, the discussion of it. The fact that this information spread and that it created public opinion demonstrates a widespread interest in this particular topic. As a trusted counsellor, Njal has the privilege of hearing about events from a primary source. Gunnar comes directly to his friend in the pursuit of his good advice and brings desirable information with him.

Those skilled in offering counsel were often able to predict the tragedy which would befall anyone who did not heed their warnings. In \textit{Bandamanna saga}, Vali cautions Uspak that if he is unwilling to accept his guidance: “Then will things go a worser road…but it is thine own doing.”\textsuperscript{153} Uspak respects neither the counsel nor the warning and things go as Vali has predicted. Similarly, Njal takes great care to warn his close friend Gunnar of possible dangers, his counsel taking on an air of prophecy. When Gunnar agrees to reclaim Unna’s goods, Njal gives him very precise advice but also a warning: “…I shall give you the advice that seems to me most promising; it will work out well if you follow it in every detail, but if you don’t, your life will be in danger.”\textsuperscript{154} Gunnar is able to follow these instructions and all goes well for him. Although their powers are represented as divinatory within the sagas, in reality it is likely that men like Njal were able to accurately predict outcomes based on their extensive knowledge of the situation and the personalities and motivations of those involved.

Sharing counsel established and reinforced friendships but neglecting to seek out or follow another’s advice was not only insulting, it most often led to disaster. Icelandic sagas emphasise the \textit{communal} nature of discussion and information flow. In \textit{Bandnamma saga}, Oddr’s father upbraids him for losing a legal case on account of it being “wrongly started from the beginning”:

\begin{itemize}
\item For example, Green, 1893 (CH3, CH 12, CH 17)
\item Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 55, p135)
\item Morris, Magnusson, 1891 (\textit{Bandamanna}, CH 5)
\item Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 21, p75)
\end{itemize}
…thou deemedst thyself all sufficient, and wouldst not come down to ask anyone’s advice; and now I suppose you think that you are still alone sufficient to deal with the matter, in which the one thing to look to is to come out of it successfully, since that is the important thing for one who deems himself above all.\textsuperscript{155}

ODDR has shown himself to be proud and independent to a fault, and it is the root of his undoing. Úfeigr’s admonition indicates a belief that no one man had all the information required to triumph in a legal case, and also that making friends through the process of counselling was absolutely necessary for success.

In \textit{Njálæ}, Unna marries Valgerd without consulting any of her kinsmen and the author informs us that “…Gunnar and Njal, and many others strongly disapproved of the marriage…”\textsuperscript{156} Not only is Valgard an unpopular man, the result of their unadvised union is Mord, a man described as having “malicious cunning [and whose] advice was always calculated to cause trouble.”\textsuperscript{157} Mord grows up hating his kinsmen and uses his guile to bring about their ruination. It is as if the saga’s author is warning that overlooking good counsel will result in destruction through evil advice. It is also a sign that discussion was something which bound together kin groups as well as friends. It would be reasonable for kin to feel that their opinions should be taken into account when a decision which could affect the entire group, such as a marriage, was being made.

\textbf{Information as a Commodity to Non-Persons}

The social elite’s necessity for information is clearly demonstrated within the sagas. As a result of its desirability, news became an object of value not only to the powerful but also to non-persons. As the lowest order of society, non-persons had very few resources available to them and information trading acted as a way to improve their condition, often as a means of their very survival. Unlike their superiors who exchanged information as a gift, non-persons generally used it to acquire material goods.

An immediate connection between news and its reward is found in the treatment of Oddbiörg, the wandering spaewife. In this passage it becomes clear that both parties have expectations in an exchange of information:

\begin{quote}
A feeling existed that it was of some consequence for the mistress of the house to receive her well, for that what she said depended more or less on how she was entertained…Saldis asked her to spae something, and that something good…
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{155} Coles, 1882 (\textit{Bandnæma}, CH 5)

\textsuperscript{156} Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 25, p83)

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid, (CH 25, p83)
Oddbiörg disappoints her hostess by giving very little information, merely hinting that the future would not be promising:

Saldis exclaimed, If I am to judge by this unsatisfactory speech of yours, I suppose you are not pleased with your treatment here. You must not, said Oddbiörg, let this affect your hospitality…Then Saldis said, I should have thought my good treatment of you deserved some other omen; and if you deal with evil bodings, you will have a chance of being turned out of doors.

In the episode involving the spaewife the relationship between information and reward is abundantly clear. This wandering woman survives solely on the generosity of the households which she visits. Although the spaewife should not really be expected to tell a ‘false’ fortune simply to please her hosts, this event demonstrates the expectation that a good reception deserved equally good information, and vice versa. If the spaewife is able to please Saldis she will not be ‘turned out of doors’, she will be given the food and shelter which a wanderer is always in need of. On the other hand, Oddbiörg seems to be subtly warning Saldis that should she withdraw her hospitality she will also lose her access to the communication channel formed by the spaewife during her travels. It may seem unusual that Saldis is unhappy with the fortune which has been told for her; surely if this is a true portent of the future then it is not something which the spaewife can be expected to control. However, Saldis’ displeasure may have arisen not from the omen itself but rather the brevity of the spaewife’s speech; the housewife wishes for more information in return for her generosity.

Information could also act as a commodity for non-persons attached to a household. Although they did not survive on its rewards, it was possible for shepherds to improve their situation through information trading. One such shepherd is a member of Gunnar’s household in Njála. Returning to Hlidarend with some important news about the movement of Gunnar’s enemies, the shepherd is granted the right to “only do whatever work [he wishes]” from that time onward. It is interesting that the boy’s first instinct upon receiving this freedom is to go to sleep: “The boy went to bed and fell asleep at once.” The position of shepherd was a demanding one and clearly the young man found his work exhausting. Being freed from his duties is as great a payment as he could hope for. A similar event occurs at Bergthorsknoll when Njal tells his shepherd: “You will never have cause to regret this service”. It is

158 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 55, p133)
159 An interesting discussion of this passage is found in Jochens, 1995. She identifies ‘unrelenting work’ as a natural human condition, something which sets the shepherd boy apart from vagrant information carriers who travel aimlessly and could therefore be considered unnatural. (99)
160 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 69, p158)
unclear precisely what this will mean for the shepherd; what is certain is that he has won the favour of the head of his household and in doing so improved his standing among the householders. In both of these cases the shepherd is able to promote himself using information.

**Information as a Commodity to Vagrants**

Like the spaewife, vagrants were able to exchange information for those things they needed, such as food, shelter, support and favour. As discussed in the previous section regarding the legal treatment of vagrants, this group could expect very little charity under normal circumstances and as a result trading news would have become a necessity for survival.

It is clear that vagrants used their knowledge as a bartering tool. In one example, the *gongukona* hasten to tell Bergthora a piece of news with the certainty of a reward:

> The beggarwomen told themselves that they would get a reward from Bergthora if they told her about this. So they slipped away down to Bergthorsknoll and told her the whole story secretly, without being asked.\(^\text{161}\)

It is interesting that the author has specified that the women tell the story ‘without being asked’, indicating that this would normally be expected in this type of exchange. If they had felt less assured of payment it is likely that the vagrant women would have waited for Bergthora to ask them for their news, increasing its value through suspense. The combination of these two conditions, namely, voluntary information sharing and surety of payment, would suggest that one would not exist without the other under normal circumstances.

A slightly different mode of conversation is described in a brief encounter between a group of travelling vagrants and the Njalssons:

> Some beggarwomen came there, who claimed to have travelled a long way; the brothers asked them what news they had, and they replied that they had none to speak of, apart from one thing that had seemed unusual. The Njalssons asked what that might be, and they told them to keep nothing back. They agreed.\(^\text{162}\)

In this instance it is clear that drawing out the conversation by forcing the Njalssons to ask for each item individually will not be to the women’s advantage. They have piqued their listener’s interest but in this case a ‘short, curt’ answer is considered to be more appropriate, indicated by the agreement to ‘keep nothing back’.

These two events from *Njála* help to illustrate that despite its equal importance to both groups, news was treated rather differently by vagrants and the social elite. The upper classes treated information as a commodity to be traded willingly between friends or to be ‘bought’ from

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\(^{161}\) Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 44, p115)

\(^{162}\) Ibid, (CH 127, p262)
non-persons. Vagrants needed to be able to ‘sell’ every bit of news they possessed for the highest amount possible. Its status as a commodity to this group of non-persons is demonstrated by the careful way in which they dispense it. The payment for information is not usually specified but Njála gives us an example of information being traded for room and board. In the guise of Huckster Hedinn, a lowly wanderer, Gunnar is invited to eat and sleep at Hrut’s home.\textsuperscript{163} Hrut does not extend this offer out of charity but rather in exchange for conversation. It seems likely that beggars would most often be seeking a reward of this type, namely the fulfillment of their basic needs.

Generosity towards beggars, possibly giving more than their information was worth, would have encouraged them to return the next time they had news, not only in hopes of further payment, but perhaps also from a sense of duty. A clever merchant does not want to be paid in full because it will release his debtors from their obligation to him. Goodwill was another intangible reward which both sides in an exchange may have sought to acquire. In Cat Harbour people looked for the opportunity to incur obligation and in many cases it seems that this was preferred to payment in full. However, this kind of relationship was not sought after, or willingly entered into, with strangers whose behaviour may be unpredictable.\textsuperscript{164} It may have been better for householders to pay a vagrant well, rather than feel indebted to them. The generosity of different households would have been remembered by beggars who would be more likely to return somewhere that they felt sure of a good reward, creating a mutually beneficial relationship for the householders and the vagrants involved.

\textbf{Mobility}

The value of information was dictated to a great extent by mobility. In a discussion of the commoditisation of conversation it is important to consider the conditions under which information could be exchanged. How mobile were different groups and how did this affect the manner and location of their information exchange? The way in which news was exchanged, and the separation between those who had access to first and second hand news, affected both the news bearer and their audience. Ease of movement could be dictated by gender and social position, creating different preferences and opportunities for interaction.

\textbf{Gender and Mobility in Newfoundland and Iceland}

An examination of both Newfoundland and Iceland shows that the factors of access and mobility were primarily based upon gender. For instance, in Codroy Valley, women were excluded from public meetings because drinking, a prerequisite for participation, was

\textsuperscript{163} Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 22, p77-78)

\textsuperscript{164} Faris, 1972 (124)
considered too ‘männish’.\textsuperscript{165} They were dependant on second-hand information to learn of meetings’ events. This exclusion exemplifies their lack of mobility and shows how different expectations of male and female behaviour affected woman’s opportunity for involvement in the community. Melvin Fireside explained the gendered discrepancy in movement in his study of Newfoundland’s Savage Cove:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Just as the men[’s work requires that they] come and go from the community while the women stay, so men’s movements are much more free about the community than women’s as women’s duties require their more constant attendance upon the home. The men do more visiting in the evenings, and on the north side of the settlement some are usually found congregated in one of the houses which serves as an informal meeting place for the men of that half of the community. Here they chat and discuss the events of the day. It is strictly a man’s meeting with the woman of the house the only woman present. Men also have a greater chance to get about during the day as their work activities mostly lie outside of the home…}\textsuperscript{166}
\end{quote}

Men met each other outside the home, whereas women were more likely to visit each other, or be visited in, their own homes. In Deep Harbour, Newfoundland, “some women rarely [stepped] out of the house” preferring instead to send their children on any necessary errands.\textsuperscript{167} Having the opportunity to meet in a neutral setting as the men did facilitated an easy flow of information. Men did not need a reason to stop by the store or a work site, and these open community areas allowed for interaction between men who did not normally have a particularly close relationship. On the other hand, for a woman to visit another’s house she would either have needed to have a specific purpose there or have been a very close friend of the family; this is of course assuming that she had the time and the freedom to leave the house in the first place. The labours of men were mostly group oriented; at the very least they required that the man leave the home, providing an opportunity for interactions. Women’s work was solitary in its nature, each woman being responsible for her own home and having few occasions to cooperate with others. In addition to the more naturally occurring obstacles of household duties, are the behavioural restrictions placed on women living in a deeply patriarchal society, a factor which is also present in the sagas.

The Icelandic connection between women and the household is evidenced in \textit{Laxdæla saga}:

\begin{quote}
“Theorleik came to talk to his stepfather and his mother, and said he wished to go abroad. ‘I am quite tired of sitting at home like a woman, and I wish that means to travel should be furnished to me.’”\textsuperscript{168}
\end{quote}

If staying at home was directly associated with the behaviour of women,

\textsuperscript{165} Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 108)
\textsuperscript{166} Firestone, 1974 (74)
\textsuperscript{167} Chiaramonte, 1970 (14)
\textsuperscript{168} Press, 1880 (70)
being given the opportunity to travel was its natural masculine counterpart. This quotation illustrates an aspect of a society reflected in its members’ thoughts and understanding. In the same saga a brief passage involving a husband and wife gives further insight into a woman’s role:

It is told how one spring Olaf broke the news to Thorgerd that he wished to go out voyaging “And I wish you to look after our household and children.” Thorgerd said she did not much care about doing that; but Olaf said he would have his way.169

If men were to have free movement and the ability to travel then their wives, almost by default, could not. As the less powerful of the two, the restrictive task of managing the household fell to the wife. In some cases this would also have been a consequence of the necessity of caring for infant children, a role assigned to mothers which would have prevented them from travelling far from home. This immobility would have made it difficult for women to gather information and increased their reliance on outsiders.

Mobility, Relationships and Access to Information in Newfoundland and Iceland
As pointed out by Faris, Newfoundland’s children were necessary news gatherers and errand runners for housebound mothers.170 This requirement reveals the limitations placed upon the province’s women as well as demonstrating one of the ways in which they worked around them in order to acquire information.

The obstacles which prevented Newfoundland’s women from accessing the primary sources of information forced them to create their own channels. Children seem to have been their most important connection to the outside world, but there is also evidence that women were able to share information with one another. Faris mentions that women in Cat Harbour who met along the road would step into one of their gardens before speaking together,171 and Chiaramonte found that women in Deep Harbour did form social networks, albeit ones confined to their own neighbourhoods.172 Presumably, men returning home would have shared news with their families, but it appears that the public discussion of information was reserved for interactions between males. As well, there could be long periods of time when men were occupied away from home, which functioned as a ‘base camp’ from which they went out to sea or into the woods to work.173

169 Press, 1880 (29)
170 Faris, 1966 (240)
171 Ibid, (239)
172 Chiaramonte, 1970 (14)
173 Firestone, 1974 (73)
The women presented in the Íslendingasögur had a similarly home-oriented existence. The necessity of their presence at the homestead restricted their field of movement and limited the frequency and variety of their interactions. In this case it is important to consider the other outlets these women would have used to share and receive information, activities which were certainly just as necessary for powerful women as for their male kinsmen.

It is reasonable to speculate that children carried news in medieval Iceland, however it would have been restricted to that which they could gain within a relatively close proximity to their own homes. As well, despite what would seem an obvious need for female friendship and information exchange, there is minimal saga evidence that this type of relationship existed. Natalie Van Deuusen believes the lack of Icelandic saga sisterhood is a result of its incongruity with traditional medieval concepts of friendship and the threat it posed to established kinship structures. However, the examples of female companionship which she provides to prove its existence serve to further emphasise female immobility. For instance, in Fljotsdala saga, Gróa goes to live with her beloved sister, but only after becoming a widow and in Laxdæla saga, Thorgerd Egilsdottir sends word to her son telling him that she wishes to travel to a friend, seemingly requiring his male permission, support or accompaniment. A further example of female affection from Laxdæla saga is the reaction of Mellkorka’s wet nurse upon finding out that her former charge is alive and well; the older woman cries tears of joy but it is notable that she hears this information from a secondary source and does not personally interact with her ‘friend’ who she has not been in direct contact with for many years. This is not to discredit the suggestion that women had more extensive friendships than those represented in the sagas, or that women within the same household did not work together to gather and process information. What it does indicate is that women were unable to form politically based friendships in the same manner as men, and that in most cases it would have

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174 Van Deusen, 2014. See also, Karras, 2003 for a discussion of the tension between kinship and friendship relationships and its effect on women.
175 Ibid, (67)
176 “Dersom kvinnen mistet sin mann, samtidig som barna var mindreårige og hun overtok ledelsen for husholdet, ble hun en ‘mann’ i samfunnets øyne og fikk nesten alle de rettigheter en mannlig leder for et hushold hadde, inkludert den å inngå i venner i vennskapsrelasjoner.” (Sigurðsson, 2010 (132)) Although it would have been possible for widows to form friendships, the scenario outlined here may have been rather exceptional because of the number of conditions required for widows to experience this level of freedom and power. How many of this type of widow would have remarried? How would their economic status have affected their newfound freedom? And would they really be rid of all of the female duties which bound them to their household? For some information on the unique position of widows, see Ricketts, 2010. Although this text, as with many others, focuses on the prominent figure of the elite woman, it nonetheless provides a useful examination of these women’s position within society.
177 Van Deusen, 2014 (56)
178 Ibid, (67)
been difficult for them to maintain friendships through frequent face-to-face meetings.\footnote{179} Certainly the freedom to travel and exchange gifts which constituted the basis of male friendships was unavailable to the majority of women. There would of course have been opportunities for women to socialise with one another at events such as feasts and games, however these meetings were inconsistent and do not constitute a reliable channel of communication.\footnote{180}

Medieval Icelandic men, at least the prominent and powerful figures on which the sagas focus, spent a great deal of time away from home. They had to attend assemblies and maintain their relationships with distant friends in order to uphold their power. As a consequence, they had more constant access to news and regular opportunities to discuss it. As in Newfoundland, however, the length of their absence meant that these men could not be considered a reliably consistent information carrier for their own households. At the very least, much of the news that they acquired would have been ‘old’ by the time that they returned home.

Given the apparent scarcity of the Icelandic woman’s connections, the role of the non-person as communication channel takes on a new significance, as does the unique mobility of gýngukona among women.

It is noticeable that interactions between householders and non-persons vary slightly in their format depending on who is involved. One possible explanation for the different interactions between vagrants and men and women may be found in their respective mobility. Vagrants and shepherds were forced to wander and men, particularly members of the wealthy families, were able to travel when they wished. However, women were tied to their households by their responsibilities, making it very difficult for them to enjoy any freedom of movement.

\footnote{179} As mentioned in Eldevik, 2002, there are very few examples of letters being exchanged within the sagas, and even then, all of them are written by men. It is her belief that the private letter scarcely existed in medieval Scandinavia. (57) I do not know if this assumption can be made merely from the lack of saga evidence, but it may indicate that it was not customary for women to communicate in this manner. If written correspondence was not available then personal mobility, or access to messengers, would have taken on an even greater importance for Icelandic women.

\footnote{180} Kress, 2002 contains a discussion of the themes of patriarchy and female subordination in Old Norse Literature. Kress examines the various ways in which men suppress women and argues that even the strong female characters within the literature are not free. She makes reference to a scene in Gísla saga where Thordis prevents the reconciliation of her husband and her brother’s killer, noting that this female opposition to male friendship is frequently found within the sagas. (91) The same theme can be seen in the main text which I have used for this thesis, Njála, and the animosity between Njal and Gunnar’s wives which threatens their own great friendship. It is clear that friendships can be a point of contention between the genders, and also that female efforts to break male relationships often fail, in these examples because of men’s ability to communicate with one another. Friendship plays an important role in creating personal power and independence and it is interesting to consider whether the lack of female friendship, and therefore lack of communication between women, is one way in which the saga patriarchy is expressed. It is also notable that in these examples women act alone, or with the assistance of servants, but not with friends, in their attempts to assert their power and disrupt male relationships. The inability of women to take counsel with friends may be one of the reasons that their words were so often considered untrustworthy, see Chapter 4 Gender and Gossip.
The vagrants’ information may have held less value for men who were free to travel, but it was extremely important to housebound women who had no other means of acquiring news. The beggars did not have as much to gain in their conversations with mobile male groups and attempting to draw these conversations out would have risked losing their listeners’ attention rather than exciting it. In the sagas it is primarily the male characters that perform important actions and their movements often carry a sense of urgency; the information they pick up from travelling vagrants affects their decision making in the short term. It is unsurprising then that having to interrogate the beggars would have tested such men’s patience and decreased the value of the exchange. It was possible for men to obtain news for themselves or from someone else that they met on their travels; the beggars did not monopolise the access to information in these interactions.

**Movement of Female Non-Persons in the Sagas**

Although the main factor affecting access to information channels appears to have been gender, social status had an influence as well. Women with non-person status had the opportunity to move more freely and the sagas suggest that it was normal for them to do so. Apart from the obvious example of *Njála’s gongukona*, there are several other interesting saga episodes involving travelling women.

Beggar men were frequently employed as message carriers and shepherds often took on this duty of their own volition. There is also evidence that mobile women could be used to gather information. Naturally, for a woman to be mobile, she had to be free of place-specific responsibility, disqualifying most housewives. In *Njála*, when food is stolen and a storehouse destroyed, Mord advises the wronged family to send women around the district in order to discover the culprit. This scenario is especially interesting because it suggests that this was a normal method of information gathering used by chieftains such as Mord. The women Mord employs act as a non-person communication channel which has been constructed by a member of the social elite for a specific purpose. This is an indication that active and ambitious householders might not always wait for non-persons to come to them but rather that they had the ability to summon them in times of need.

These women spend a fortnight travelling around the area trading small goods with the housewives and coming back with the stolen goods which Hallgerd had given them.\(^\text{181}\)

According to this saga, it was not unusual for women to move about in this way, if anything they were chosen especially because their presence was common enough not to raise suspicion. The women were presumably able to find food and board during their travels and

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\(^{181}\) Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 49, p124)
the manner in which they are paid might indicate that they sometimes benefitted from charity; it seems that some housewives were more generous than others. It is unlikely that trading small household goods for anything that housewives were willing to part with would have generated enough income to support these women. Given the nature of their occupation and the necessity of travel it is very likely that they would also carry news from one house to the next, perhaps in the hope of a better reception and more generous payment. That these women are willing to assist in Mord’s investigation would further suggest that they were in need of assistance and were not opposed to working as a type of non-person informer, even when the nature of their task was slightly suspect.

In Hrafnkels saga Feysgoða, a servant woman spots her master Hrafnkell’s enemies approaching while out washing clothes at the river. Her presence away from the home, and her ability to immediately leave her task to return home with the news, is evidence of a certain freedom to roam. In the same passage, Hrafnkell asks this woman to run as fast as she can to summon his friends to his aid, at the same time he sends another ‘handmaiden’ out on a similar mission.182

A similar event occurs in Gísla saga, when a woman named Rannveiga is employed as a spy, albeit unsuccessfully. She is not a vagrant but is presumably not well off either; she is employed in making beds for cattle. Coming out of the byre she sees a man who she recognises as Vestein. When her identification is called into question, she is sent by Thorgrim, apparently kin of her employer, to spy on Gisli and see which strangers come to his house. Unfortunately, Rannveiga becomes flustered and is unable to give any reason for her presence outside the door when she is met there first by Gisli himself and then, at her request, by his wife. The poor woman returns home without any news to speak of.183 However, the episode is not entirely without interest. Firstly, Rannveiga is chosen over Geirmund, the other witness, despite his being Thorgrim’s kinsman. Giermund disputes Rannveiga’s description in order to protect Vestein. This is unknown to Thorgrim, who gives his male relative credit but does not automatically believe him, suggesting that Rannveiga is considered to be reliable.

Rannveiga’s apparent discomfort in her task is at odds with the reception she receives. Her inability to fulfill her assignment might suggest that she was unaccustomed to spying but it would seem that it was not unusual for her to be out and about. When Gisli meets her outside his door he does not appear to be surprised to see her, he even asks her to stay; offering room and board to a travelling woman does not appear to be an uncommon practice. After some prevaricating, Rannveiga asks to speak to Auda, the mistress of the house. This request is

182 Coles, 1882 (Hrafnkel, CH 17)
183 DaSent, 1866 (CH 7)
received as reasonable and normal and Auda comes readily to speak with the guest. Rannveiga’s employment and the way in which she has been sent out on an errand both point towards a lowly station, however, it is perfectly acceptable for her to ask to speak to the female head of a household. Auda also seems very prepared to accede to Rannveiga’s request for a meeting and is accustomed to greeting and conversing with visitors, even those of lowly station.

As mentioned previously, *Viga-Glúms saga*, includes the character of a spaewife who goes “…about in that part of the country, named Oddbiörg.” Although she has a name, something not normally associated with the non-person, she maintains a place outside of society and her identity is most strongly founded upon her profession, not herself as an individual. Like the göngukona, Oddbiörg is required to keep moving in order to support herself. By visiting new households each day she is able to tap into a renewable well of information as well as charity and hospitality. Although her prophecies are supposed to have their source in magic, realistically her omens would have been informed by the news she picked up during her travels. Her success would rely on her accuracy which is turn was dependant on her own access to information and therefore an ability to travel.

These saga episodes help to clarify the issue of female movement. The women described are not vagrant, nor do they venture outside of their own community. However, the way in which they are portrayed by the writer and treated by others indicates that the figure of the lowly travelling woman was not unexpected and could even be chosen for some tasks because of its familiarity. Although it was nearly impossible for housewives to move freely, the sagas contain evidence that unattached women and those in lowly position were able and expected to travel.

**Non-Persons as Communication Channel**

The often somewhat limited mobility of the social elite created an opportunity for non-persons to act as their envoys, naturally in return for some form of compensation. Non-persons, particularly vagrants, had an unequalled freedom of movement and gathered information during their travels which they could then use in trade. They were also able to act as messengers. This arrangement worked well for both parties; powerful leaders needed a source of information and non-persons needed the rewards which the social elite could offer them in return for performing this service. In this way the need for knowledge was strongest in the very lowest and the very highest levels of the community, amongst the non-persons for its

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184 Head, 1866 (CH 2)
value as a commodity in trade, and amongst the upper classes as a key component of their ability to maintain power.

Aside from their mobility, non-persons’ anonymity made them especially well-suited for their role as information carriers. Unconnected to any recognized group, they acted as a neutral go-between and as such they were able to acquire information which would have been unavailable to anyone else.

**The Concepts of Face and Face-Work**

In order to fully understand the usefulness of the non-persons’ anonymity, it is first necessary to explain the implications of social identity, or ‘face’. Erving Goffmann has presented and elaborated on the idea of ‘face’ in various publications. He defines it as “...an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes....” His theory is that people will attempt to maintain this identity by acting in a manner which is expected of them and appropriate to various types of social interaction. No interaction is without unique opportunities for success or failure and its outcome is limited by its independence from the broader social world. Presenting a consistent and respectable identity takes great care and in every social interaction ones’ image is put at risk. Goffmann believes in the importance of each instance of communication, even small and seemingly inconsequential conversations:

> The human tendency to use signs and symbols means that evidence of social worth and of mutual evaluations will be conveyed by very minor things, and these things will be witnessed, as will the fact that they have been witnessed. An unguarded glance, a momentary change in tone of voice, an ecological position taken or not taken, can drench a talk with judgemental significance. Therefore, just as there is no occasion of talk in which improper impressions could not intentionally or unintentionally arise, so there is no occasion of talk so trivial as not to require each participant to show serious concern with the way in which he handles himself and the others present.

Of course, some types of interaction create more anxiety than others, for instance, when one must deliver criticism or a piece of bad news, or when one is required to converse with a person they dislike or mistrust. It may also be that some behaviours are restricted by social etiquette, for example, one does not like to be known as a busybody and therefore talking about another person could be risky. If every social action is laden with complication, it becomes desirable to distance oneself from the possibility of failure by having a third party engage in necessary interactions instead. For such a purpose it is often advantageous to secure the assistance of a non-person, someone who has not been assigned a unique social identity.

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185 Goffmann, 1969, 1972
186 Goffmann, 1972 (5)
187 Ibid, (33)
and whose anonymity makes it possible for them to act with impunity. The small social cues such as tone or gaze which Goffmann places so much emphasis on may not attract notice or carry the same gravity when associated with someone beneath public interest and judgement. Apart from the more general implications of a neutral reception, the non-person is able to travel throughout the community unrestricted by normal social etiquette and conventions. They exist outside an imposed social hierarchy and are able to move freely between different groups. Without the personal risk of losing face there is no reason why a non-person would object to being used as an interaction proxy; this function could even create a positive opportunity for them to participate in a society which they are in many ways removed from.

**Children as Information Carriers in Newfoundland and Iceland**

Szwed and Faris make reference to children as information carriers, and both recognise them as non-person entities, although Faris does not use the precise term.\(^{188}\) Children were privy to news which was unavailable to their parents and were free from the behavioural sanctions which restricted the actions of adults. In Newfoundland, child news carriers encouraged the free spread of information. The children of Cat Harbour and Codroy Valley were permitted to enter houses uninvited and, in doing so, became the unnoticed observers of families’ private lives.\(^{189}\) Their unsolicited and unacknowledged visits were not met with a display of ‘neutral domesticity’ and children were in the habit of sitting quietly simply listening to the adults’ conversation.\(^{190}\) Although they were not usually acting with the conscious intention of spying, children were aware that upon returning home a detailed report would be expected!\(^{191}\)

It is clear that Newfoundlanders acknowledged the ability of their children to gather information and in some cases they were consciously used for this purpose, most often by their mothers. For instance, Faris noted that his presence, that of a ‘stranger’, motivated mothers to send their children to his house with the specific task of learning about him. The women of Cat Harbour would also send their children to the shop, the community’s main news source, rather than go themselves.\(^{192}\) In Codroy Valley, children were considered to be a “…reservoir of information about other families [and] adults would refer questions posed to them about their neighbours to children for answering.”\(^{193}\)

Children are not concerned about their self-image around adults which makes them ideal for assisting their parents by performing face-work for them. In Codroy Valley, children were

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\(^{188}\) Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 100); Faris, 1966

\(^{189}\) Ibid, (Private Cultures, 100); Faris, 1966 (239-240)

\(^{190}\) Ibid, (Private Cultures, 99). This concept will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

\(^{191}\) Ibid, (Private Cultures, 100)

\(^{192}\) Faris, 1966 (240)

\(^{193}\) Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 100)
often used to sell small items or convey an invitation, sparing adults from an interaction where there was potential to lose face by being turned down by, or turning down, another adult. Pre-adolescent boys in Cat Harbour were sent to discover the amount of another crew’s catch; for an adult to ask would have been unacceptably competitive. When the parents of one Valley family lost their access to social welfare on account of their drinking, they sent their children around the community to beg for food and money. Had the parents gone themselves not only would it have been shameful but they would have been unsuccessful, yet their neighbours were willing to give charity to their children.

When children reached adolescence their individual personalities began to be recognised and their use as news-carriers ceased. They became known by name to everyone in the community and rather than simply conveying information they started to participate in its discussion. With their growth from childhood to adolescence, these young people began to feel self-conscious and were more guarded in their social interactions; they became aware of the necessity of saving face. The changes that occur during the transition from childhood to adulthood emphasise the relationship between non-person status and the transmission of information.

Although the sagas do not provide evidence that Icelandic children functioned in the same manner as Newfoundlander children, the likelihood of this having occurred is supported by the frequency with which children have been observed to carry information and perform face-work in a variety of cultures, often acting as a vital communication method.

If children acted as non-person communication channels then why were they not represented as such by saga authors? It may be that they are less useful for the advancement of plots due to their more limited scope. Children could not be expected to wander too far from home, nor would they have been likely to relay news or deliver messages for people outside of their immediate families. If, as in Newfoundland, the use of children as information carriers was often unconscious it may also be that they would not have been considered appropriate for that role within the sagas.

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194 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 101)
195 Faris, 1972 (125)
196 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 101)
197 Faris, 1972 (77)
198 Haviland, 1977; Foster, Eric, 2004; Hotschkiss, 1967; Chiaramonte, 1970
199 See, Schultz, 1995 for information on the medieval Germanic view of children’s speech. He references a passage from Berchta in which the narrator observes that “[children] are quick to speak: they say what they hear and keep very little of it secret”, as well as a line from Frauenlist: “children speak the truth”. (48) It is interesting that there is a connection made between children and communication in Germanic perception of childhood.
Shepherds as Information Carriers
Like children, shepherds were connected to a specific household and their loyalties could affect the way they chose to handle information. Both of these groups had an awareness of their duty to inform their households, even though this was not generally presented as their specific task. Children and shepherds would have been expected to act in a predictable and socially acceptable manner and although members of these groups may have gathered information from anywhere it is likely that they would only have shared it with certain people.

Unlike children and vagrants, shepherds did not generally enter into the houses of other families but their constant movement made it possible for them to share and acquire knowledge in the course of their occupation. Saga episodes confirm the relationship between shepherds as non-persons and their use as conduits of information.

As a group, shepherds are generally portrayed as helpful and it seems that they were motivated by a desire to be of assistance to their household. The shepherd is represented as the ever-present onlooker. They did not actively seek information to trade but the nature of their profession meant that they travelled constantly and were often alone and far from home.

An episode in Njála illustrates this aspect of the shepherd’s identity. During a legal hearing at the Assembly, Skarp-Hedin completes a lengthy insult by accusing Thorkel of eating “...bits of mare’s arse...before you came here – and your shepherd saw you at it, and was amazed at such disgusting behaviour.”200 The shepherd is depicted here as an unwilling observer and Thorkel’s shame is heightened by the supposed judgement of his behaviour by a non-person. Although it is unlikely that this claim is true, Skarp-Hedin’s speech hints at the connection between shepherds and the spread of news; Thorkel’s shepherd is named as the only one present yet it is reasonable for Skarp-Hedin to claim that he knew details of the supposed event.

Further saga examples make it clear that people were well aware of the shepherds’ non-person identity and seem to indicate the conscious use of shepherds for gathering information. For instance, in Eyrbyggja saga, in hopes of catching their enemy, Arnkel, unawares, Thorbrand’s sons enlist the help of Freystein Rascal to spy on him.201 Not only does his work as a shepherd allow him to travel near Arnkel’s home, he is also innocuous and unsuspicious. This saga contains several other episodes involving shepherds and the discovery and dispersal of news. Thorstein’s shepherd brings news back to his household concerning a gathering he has

200 Magnusson, Pállsson, 1975 (CH 120, p249)
201 Morris, Magnusson, 1892 (CH 37)
seen and heard while out with his flock and Arnkel murders Hawk after his herdsman reports sighting the unfortunate victim in the woods. A shepherd in the employ of Snorri Priest brings his master tidings regarding a fight he has witnessed, inspiring Snorri and his men to make their way to the scene at once. Lastly, Freystein Rascal enters the narrative again when he comes across a man’s head while out with his sheep, making him responsible for reporting a murder.

The movement of shepherds not only made it easy for them to gather and share news, it created a communication network. Regular meetings meant that news could be passed from shepherd to shepherd and, in this way, from household to household. This network is both recognized and used in Laxdæla saga:

Aud asked the man who looked after the sheep how often he met the shepherd from Laugar. He said nearly always as was likely since there was only a neck of land between the two dairies. Then said Aud, “You shall meet the shepherd from Laugar today, and you can tell me who there are staying at the winter-dwelling or who at the dairy, and speak in a friendly way of Thord as it behoves you to do.”

Aud uses her shepherd to gain information but also to purposely disseminate ideas which are useful to her, thus demonstrating a recognition of shepherds’ vital role in the relay of news and the way in which their chain of communication functioned. This is also an example of the way that channels of information transmission could be used by the social elite to increase their power. Despite her position as a wealthy housewife, Aud’s shepherd is able to help her by performing a task which she is incapable of doing herself.

**Vagrants as Information Carriers**

The lines of communication created by travelling shepherds might have been formed by wandering vagrants as well, their movement and meetings would likely have created another such relay system albeit slightly less predictable.

Their non-person status allowed vagrants to move about with more freedom than established community members and made it possible for them to gather information with ease. Beggars enjoyed even greater mobility than shepherds because they were not tied to a specific household or task and they did not have any loyalties which would have affected their use of

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202 Morris, Magnusson, 1892 (CH 11). This episode is especially interesting because the shepherd in question makes an extra effort to gather information before returning home. He sees the fires and hears the clamour which indicate a gathering of men but rather than go home to report it at once he draws near to eavesdrop. “…when he hearkened if perchance he might hear any words clear of others…” (CH 11)

203 Ibid, (CH 35)

204 Ibid, (CH 45)

205 Ibid, (CH 43)

206 Press, 1880 (CH 35)
information. Just as Newfoundland’s children, groups of beggars were permitted to enter into people’s homes and this gave them the unique opportunity of exchanging information in a personal setting which was closed off to many other community members. For instance, vagrants could come and go between the households of bitter rivals, trading and acquiring information in each, a privilege entirely unavailable to anyone connected with the feuding families. Opportunities such as these were accessible only to vagrants and made their news especially valuable.

The sagas provide us with numerous examples of vagrants bringing news directly to householders and this service would have been particularly helpful to housebound women. Theoretically, vagrants would have been able to receive more for their information in this type of exchange. For example, in Ínghild, Berghthora and Hallgerd are always eager to hear about one another but they are unable to gather any of this information for themselves. Not only are both women restricted by household duties, the animosity between them prevents regular social interaction, creating a deficit of information and increasing the value of anything the beggar women have to relate.

This type of scenario helps to explain the apparent disregard for the boarding laws prescribed in Grágás. It is easy to see why people would have been willing to bend the rules in order to learn a special piece of information or to try to win the loyalty of a vagrant. Being generous might have encouraged beggars to come back with news or to treat their benefactors more kindly when they become the subject of news themselves! If householders were interested in improving or protecting their reputation it would have been an advantage to treat beggars kindly.

The same theory could be applied to vagrants at the Assembly. Although this gathering would have provided numerous opportunities for the elite to meet and converse with one another, they would still have experienced certain restrictions, for instance, it would not have been possible for them to visit the booths of their rivals. Mobile and anonymous beggars were able to call at all the booths and it would have been simple for them to travel between enemies giving them information about each other.

Just as with the youths of Newfoundland, Iceland’s vagrants could be employed to carry out face-work for a second party. A beggar did not need to concern himself with his self-image, making him the ideal candidate for an interaction which others might have found difficult or

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207 Chiaramonte noted that, as children were the eyes and ears of households in Deep Harbour, Newfoundland, childless couples were excluded from a great deal of the information which flowed through the community. (Chiaramonte, 1970 (12-13)) Perhaps the same was true for Icelandic households who failed to secure the help of a vagrant.
shameful. Being charged with delivering a message was another method, aside from travelling, by which beggars could gain information, although the veracity of such news might have been questionable. Vagrants never needed to feel self-conscious because they were rarely the topic of conversation and it was their information not themselves which their audience focused upon. In the sagas, beggar men are employed as messengers, and in many cases they are paid to carry libellous news. This is observed in the episode in *Kormács saga* in which Narfi pays a beggar to sing an offensive song and falsely ascribe it to Cormac. Narfi does this with the direct intention of damaging Cormac’s reputation and his relationship with the woman he loves.\(^{208}\) A very similar episode occurs in *Víga-Glúms saga* when Halli bribes a beggar to tell a story which will intimidate his son’s enemies and protect his kinsmen.\(^{209}\) Although the effect in the first episode is negative, and the second, positive, in both cases the employment of a beggar appears to have lent the information a trustworthiness which allowed it to serve its desired purpose. Perhaps this is because there is no discernable link between the beggars and their employers to make their audience suspicious.

The information that these non-persons imparted may have had serious consequences, but they were not connected with the beggars themselves. This is especially evident throughout *Njála* where the words of the *gongukona* facilitate the destruction of two families but there is no indication that they are assigned any responsibility for their part in the tragedy. This lack of responsibility is also seen in the treatment of shepherds and it serves to further emphasise their non-person status; they are not held to the same standards as other individuals. The movement of non-persons created a pathway for news to travel along and they served simply as anonymous parts of the communication process.

**Conclusion**

The advantage of access to information in Iceland’s political power game cannot be ignored. The possession of information made it possible for members of the social elite to understand and react to their surroundings; it could also be used as a gift in friendship, or a weapon against an enemy. Of course, simply having information was not sufficient for real success; it was also vital that powerful men and women knew how to use it. Careful usage of information was inextricably linked with an individual’s reputation for wisdom, yet another advantage in a society which prized this trait very highly. A wise counsellor made a valuable friend and using their abilities to form relationships would have garnered respect and provided security for them and their household.

\(^{208}\) Collingwood, Stefánsson, 1902 (114-115) Also discussed in the section Vagrant as Non-Person in Chapter 1.

\(^{209}\) Head, 1866 (CH 18)
Given the importance of information for the social elite, it comes as no surprise that it was treated as a valuable commodity. The commodification of information meant that it was also sought after by non-persons, albeit for slightly different reasons. Although they did not participate in the grand political power game of their superiors, there was certainly stratification within the non-person community and knowledge could hold the key to advancement for both vagrants and shepherds.

In both Iceland and Newfoundland, different groups experienced different levels of mobility dictated by gender and social position. In turn, mobility influenced the value of information and the conditions under which it could be exchanged, creating opportunities for non-persons to take on the important role of communication channel for the upper classes. Their anonymity and freedom of movement meant that non-persons were able to share and acquire information in ways that were impossible for the social elite. The various methods by which news could be gathered encouraged people to work together. Husbands and wives, as well as householders and their superiors, needed to pool their resources for success as a group.

Evidence of the differences in mobility found in the conversations held between the göngukona and men and women draw attention to the gendered aspect of hospitality. As mentioned earlier, gift giving played a central role in male friendships. However, the lack of female friendships within the sagas means that we have little information about the gift giving traditions of women. It is interesting to consider the hospitality shown to wanderers in the home as a way in which women could also be interpreted as gift givers. Furthermore, the tradition that a transaction involving gifts or favours could form the basis of a relationship between friends or householders and chieftains leads one to consider what kind of relationship could be created through exchanges between householders and non-persons, especially vagrants. Although they could not be said to have a normal friendship, a connection is made and mutual expectations are attached to the process of exchange and interaction.

Information was at the core of a chieftain’s power base, however, in the lengthy discussion of politics in Iceland, this resource has never been recognised. In order to fully understand the Icelandic power game it is essential that the implications of information and communication be taken into consideration. As an extension of the treatment of mobility and the exchange of information, the next chapter will focus on the settings in which information was shared and the influence of setting on issues such as conversational structure and etiquette, the vulnerability of those present and opportunities for non-persons to take control.
Chapter 3. Information, Setting and Vulnerability

Introduction

In a discussion of communication methods one should consider the settings and conditions under which information could be exchanged. Social events created a natural meeting point for contact and conversation. However, these gatherings also generated news and actually increased the desire for new information and the necessity for discussion. Feasts, sporting events and assemblies (vårthing, leið and Alþingi) punctuated the Icelandic social year and created a framework for interaction; they were the times when friendships were formed and marriages were arranged, when feuds were fuelled or buried and when oaths were sworn and put to the test. Discussion of these events, and the information traded there, could continue long after the gathering had broken up, those in attendance carrying news back to their families for continued sharing and scrutiny. This chapter contains a discussion of these events and their necessity within the community as a place of exchange, however, it also deals with the vulnerability which was an unavoidable consequence of taking part. The social elite who required information to maintain their power placed themselves in a precarious position during its acquisition; any details which they revealed about themselves during public interactions could be used against them. Here the potential for guile and whetting must be considered as non-persons gained control over their social superiors during the exchange of information. Knowledge is power and it created the opportunity for non-persons to have the upper hand in interactions with the elite members of their communities as well as the possibility of voluntary vagrancy.

I will begin this chapter with a description of vulnerability as a cultural concept and continue with examples of its effect on communities in Newfoundland and Iceland. Next I will use a model of information sharing from Cat Harbour to demonstrate the conventions of conversation and the importance of setting. This will be followed by a discussion of saga settings for communication and their various associated risks and benefits. Finally, I will offer examples of the negative ways in which information can be used and conclude with a discussion of the potential for voluntary vagrancy as a result of the subtle social power of the non-person.
The Concept of Vulnerability

Before giving specific examples of vulnerability in Newfoundland and Iceland, I will provide an overview of vulnerability as a concept and how it has been expressed in both cultures.

Hávamál warns that: “Each man should be watchful and wary in speech and slow to put faith in a friend for the words which one to another speaks he may win reward of ill”\(^{210}\) but also advises: “Let the wary stranger who seeks refreshment keep silent with sharpened hearing; with his ears let him listen, and look with his eyes; thus each wise man spies out the way”.\(^{211}\) The value of information to the wanderer is explicitly stated, as is the restraint which is required in company. Another verse treats the spread of secrets: “Each man who is wise and would wise be called must ask and answer aright. Let one know thy secret, but never a second, --if three a thousand shall know”.\(^{212}\) This verse calls to mind the very rigid question and answer conversation patterns of the sagas,\(^{213}\) serves as a testament to the extensive spread of oral information and reinforces the need for guarded conversation. It is better to sit quietly\(^{214}\) than risk exposing a secret or lack of wisdom: “Cautious and silent let him enter a dwelling; to the heedful comes seldom harm”.\(^{215}\) Warnings against the danger of excessive drinking and eating are also frequent; presumably both will lead one to speak out of turn, revealing confidential information and a foolish nature.\(^{216}\) Hávamál makes it clear that no slip in one’s social countenance will go unnoticed or unreported. The amount of attention paid to careful conduct is evidence of the very clearly recognised vulnerability of the individual in social situations, a sentiment echoed by Goffman in his discussions of face-work; there is no interaction so trivial that one is not required to exercise caution in the presentation of self. Conversely, Hávamál also teaches that conversation is necessary to form relationships and that being able to share one’s mind and feel at ease with close friends is important, “for man is the joy of man.”\(^{217}\) Discourse is, therefore, a human necessity but one which must be undertaken with caution; a careful balance must be struck: “man unfolds him by speech with man, but grows over secret through silence”.\(^{218}\) Social reserve has its advantages, but it also hinders the formation of friendships and the collection of information.

Similar warnings are found in Bible passages concerning information sharing and the dangers of imprudent friendship: “Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not

\(^{210}\) Bray, 1908, verse 65

\(^{211}\) Ibid, verse 7

\(^{212}\) Ibid, verse 63

\(^{213}\) For example, Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 44, p114; CH 92, p201)

\(^{214}\) Bray, 1908, verses 6, 26-29

\(^{215}\) Ibid, verse 6

\(^{216}\) Ibid, verses 12, 17, 19, 20, 30, 33, 130

\(^{217}\) Ibid, verse 47

\(^{218}\) Ibid, verse 57
associate with a simple babbler”\textsuperscript{219} and “Let everyone beware of his neighbour, and put no trust in any brother, for every brother is a deceiver, and every neighbour goes about as a slanderer.”\textsuperscript{220} Once again, an anxiety about social vulnerability is expressed alongside a caution against placing one’s full trust in another. The information carrier is described as a ‘simple babbler’; while dismissive, this term also carries a sense of unease, the slanderer does not act with intelligence or discretion and is therefore an unpredictable source of social discord.

There is a common recognition of the vulnerability which accompanies information exchange, but also of the necessity for face-to-face interaction.

**Vulnerability in Newfoundland**

Besides the cultivation of intimacy in friendship, conversation is a means by which to gain information; if one is not present at a certain event then it becomes the only means. The people in Codroy Valley had an aversion to conversing in public and most interactions were performed within the family home, specifically the kitchen.\textsuperscript{221} Discussions between people who met on the road were less desirable because they exposed the participants to community conjecture.\textsuperscript{222} When someone didn’t want to reveal the source of their information they would simply say that they had “heard a piece of news along the road”.\textsuperscript{223} This behaviour brings to mind Hávamál’s warning that “day’s eyes are many”.\textsuperscript{224} Families in the Valley were acutely conscious of the way in which they were perceived by others and even within such a close community, some privacy was maintained. When a guest arrived at a house they would be presented with an image of “domestic neutrality” - mother at the stove or doing the washing, father by the fire and children sitting quietly. In order to prepare this façade, families had to make use of the few moments while the visitor walked around to the back of the house in view of the windows, front doors were kept locked and in some cases did not even have steps leading to them. Children were also encouraged to keep an eye out for approaching visitors.\textsuperscript{225} The family worked together to control their public image and it is easy to imagine the women in Njála preparing themselves in a similar way for the arrival of outsiders such as vagrants. It is also possible to consider the Icelandic household working together in the same way as

\textsuperscript{219} The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Proverbs 20:19
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid, Jeremiah 9:4
\textsuperscript{221} Other authors have also observed this predilection for conversing indoors, for instance Frankenberg, 1957 (20). It is interesting that these authors have specifically noted the interior setting of the kitchen, a space which is between the private and public realms.
\textsuperscript{222} This behaviour is also noted in Faris, 1966. All discussions of a remotely private nature take place in shops, homes or gardens.
\textsuperscript{223} Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 100)
\textsuperscript{224} Bray, 1908, verse 81
\textsuperscript{225} Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 99)
Newfoundland families. Householders would have found it mutually beneficial to cooperate in gathering information and protecting their common image.

**Vulnerability in Iceland**
Non-persons could be extremely useful in both gathering information and performing facework, yet it was still necessary for people to interact with their own informers or messengers. Vagrants and shepherds were a valuable resource but, in using them, other members of society, even, and perhaps most especially, the most powerful, made themselves vulnerable.

The descriptions of Hrut and Snorri Priest’s characters presented in the previous chapter demonstrate the importance of wisdom and good counsel. Although these men appear to be very similar, they are both wise and loyal friends, there is one important distinction between them, it is said of Snorri that “…little men knew of his thought for good or ill; he was a wise man…” but this quality is not ascribed to Hrut. This may seem like a small detail but there is a reason that the saga author has mentioned it; he is making his reader aware of Snorri’s prudence and the clever way in which he controls his public image by managing his vulnerability. However, despite being Snorri’s equal in seemingly every other way, Hrut is less skilful in keeping his thoughts and words to himself.

*Njala*’s Gunnar, in the guise of Huckster Hedinn, provides an example of how the social elite’s thirst for knowledge could be the cause of their own undoing. As instructed by Njal, Gunnar disguises himself as Huckster Hedinn, an unpredictable wanderer, in order to gain the confidence of Hrut and to trick him. Although Huckster Hedinn develops a reputation for being rude and aggressive, he is also known for being *talkative* and Hrut is only too happy to invite him in for a meal, and even to stay the night, in exchange for news. Hrut’s keenness is such that he does not even wait for Hedinn to come to his home but makes the effort to

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226 For further information on vulnerability in Newfoundland, see Chiaramonte, 1970. He observed the same customs in house construction and the reception of outsiders into the family home. During his time in Deep Harbour, Chiaramonte noted the separation between households, even to the exclusion of kin. He found: “…a self-containment of households…limitations upon social visiting [and] restrictions on verbal communication…” but also that information was shared very freely between members of the same household. (12) On one occasion, Chiaramonte was discussing business prospects with an informant when the man’s brother (and next-door neighbour) entered. The informant immediately changed the subject but then returned to it as if nothing had happened after his brother had left the room. (13) See also, Haviland, 1977 for a similar phenomenon in rural Mexico. He found that households viewed themselves as competing units and conversation with kin was often frowned upon. For instance, wives were discouraged from visiting their birth families because of anxiety about what they might discuss with them (188) and people avoided drinking in unguarded situations for fear of what they might give away. (189) The way in which household allegiances trumped kinship loyalties in these small communities is interesting in its similarity to the centrality of the household in Iceland as discussed throughout this thesis but particularly in connection with non-person identity and the possibility of households working together to control information.

227 Morris, Magnusson, 1892 (CH 15)
228 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 22, p76 -78)
actively invite him. This action in itself is proof of the power of wanderers and their ability to control some of their society’s most powerful men.

Hedinn is able to gain access to Hrut’s home, where, eager for conversation and information, Hrut does not guard his behaviour or his speech and is duped into summoning himself in a lawsuit which he had been attempting to avoid. Hedinn is able to gain access to Hrut’s home, where, eager for conversation and information, Hrut does not guard his behaviour or his speech and is duped into summoning himself in a lawsuit which he had been attempting to avoid. The conversation between Hrut and Huckster Hedinn is an example of how a member of the social elite may have interacted with a non-person, it is also an example of the vulnerability of their position. In his search for information, Hrut unwittingly allows a vagrant to influence him.

The value attached to dependable information is made clear in Njala. Gunnar rewards a loyal news-delivering shepherd by telling him “…from now on you need only do whatever work you wish…” and Njal enthusiastically praises another, exclaiming, “What a household it would be if there were many like you! You will never have cause to regret this service.” Össurr of Póðar saga hreðu is so pleased with the information delivered to him by a beggar boy that he ignores the accompanying impudent comments, merely replying, “Well do you say, my boy.” However, unlike Hrut, these men display caution. In spite of their animated responses, a distance is maintained in these master and servant exchanges; vagrants and shepherds are not the friends or confidants of their superiors and this limits the scope of their interactions. In the same conversation referenced above, Gunnar warns his shepherd not to be “over-sensitive” in reacting to Skamkel’s abuse, despite personally considering it grounds for vengeance. In another episode Gunnar receives news that his wife caused a member of Njal’s household to be killed, something which must have been very upsetting to him yet: “Gunnar did not criticize Hallgerd in front of the messenger and no one knew at first whether he approved or disapproved”, however, upon returning home Gunnar is said to have reproached his wife. Similarly, Bergthora brushes off reported insults directed at her husband and sons by Thrain Sigfusson and his companions, simply telling the beggar women who brought her the information that “Few people are spoken of in the way they would choose.” However, she rewards the women well, indicating that this information is important to her, and passes it on to her male relations, amongst whom it inspires plotting and revenge. Her reaction to the beggar women is distinctly out of character; she has shown

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229 In the previous chapter I made reference to a description of Hrut as an exemplar of desirable male characteristics. He is known for his wisdom and his good counsel and it would seem that his almost desperate need to maintain this reputation is what makes him so vulnerable to Huckster Hedinn’s trickery.

230 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 55, p133)

231 Ibid, (CH 69, p158)

232 Coles, 1882 (Thóðr Hreða, CH 9)

233 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 55, p133)

234 Ibid, (CH 36, p99-100)

235 Ibid, (CH 92, p201)
herself to be nothing if not extraordinarily vengeful and easy to offend. Her calm reception of the news is also at odds with the way the same information is received by her sons later on.

Is this reluctance to betray their true feelings the result of aristocratic pride? Would it have been inappropriate for these powerful householders to discuss their emotions with someone socially so far beneath them? Certainly arrogance could have contributed to their behaviour but it is also important to consider whether they are purposefully attempting to limit the information which flows away from their households. By inviting vagrants into their home in order to gain crucial information, the social elite also made themselves and their households vulnerable – they had to recognise that the same vagrants who brought them news would happily carry information about them back into the community. In a strange juxtaposition of power, the beggars are able to control the actions of their superiors by forcing them to modify their behaviour. Vagrants would take note of how their audience reacted to news and how they rewarded it, as well as who else was present and what those people did and said; all the information that a powerful householder may have wished to learn about others might be gleaned by beggars in their presence as well. Being in possession of information accorded beggars the opportunity to enter into households and observe; having news to share created an opportunity for them to gather more.

Without loyalty to a particular household, and requiring information as a means of subsistence, vagrants could not afford to keep secrets. Householders had to acknowledge that beggars were able to speak with impunity; they did not fear the consequences of sharing a delicate piece of news, if anything they were eager to do so as it was likely to be valuable. It must also have been clear that beggars did not expose themselves in the same manner as householders; as non-persons they could not be made vulnerable in the same way as people with established identities and reputations. It is also worth considering whether revealing information to one visiting vagrant would have made it available to the entire beggar communication network. There is evidence of vagrants travelling together and working together in groups and it is possible that they also helped each other by exchanging information.

**Reputation**

The vulnerability associated with information exchange can only create anxiety within a society which places value on personal reputation. Medieval Icelanders were especially preoccupied with individual and familial honour\(^\text{236}\) and in a society where oral communication was the principle channel by which information was disseminated, what people said about one another was as good as fact; a sentiment often expressed with a sense of

\(^{236}\) See, Stewart, 1994.
resignation is that none are better spoken of than they deserve\textsuperscript{237} or as they would like.\textsuperscript{238} As discussed previously in the section on the Significance of Names, both Icelanders and Newfoundlanders were strongly invested in their personal and familial status, as well as that of their households.

The theme of honour and the longevity of reputation is found in Hávamál: “Cattle die and kinsmen die, thyself too soon must die, but one thing never, I ween, will die, -- fair fame of one who has earned.”\textsuperscript{239} A very similar sentiment is found in the next verse which is repeated word for word with the exception of the final line: “…the doom on each one dead.”\textsuperscript{240} These verses ensure their readers that their reputation will outlive them, for better or for worse.

The subjects of honour and communication are closely tied together within the sagas. There are countless instances of action being influenced by what people might say.\textsuperscript{241} In Bandamanna saga, Stymir frets that folk will call Thorarin unmanly if he does not participate in a legal matter and that someone else is being well spoken of because of his involvement with the case.\textsuperscript{242} Thorarin’s friend is not only worried that he will lose his manly reputation but also that he is forfeiting an opportunity to gain public attention and fame. In another conversation from the same saga, Odd is wary of giving hospitality to a passing trader telling him: “…thou art not much praised of men, nor art thou well-beloved: men deem that there is guile under thy brow, even as it was with thy kin before thee.”\textsuperscript{243} Odd’s words demonstrate the lasting effect of familial reputation on individuals. Both of these examples also show that public opinion was formed through the sharing of information throughout the country.

One way in which the relationship between communication, reputation and vulnerability is demonstrated is by the importance of songs as a form of information sharing in Newfoundland and Iceland.

\textsuperscript{237} Morris, Magnusson, 1891 (Bandamanna, CH2)
\textsuperscript{238} Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 55, p133)
\textsuperscript{239} Bray, 1908, verse 75
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid, verse 76
\textsuperscript{241} Referring back to the discussion of gift giving and the expectation of a return discussed in Chapter 3, the idea of a reward in return for generosity could also be defined in terms of communication and reputation. For example when Njála’s Hrut says: “Let us make his journey good; he has certainly suffered a great loss; it would be well spoken of to our credit if we gave him gifts, and it would make him our friend for life.” (Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 17, p72)) Friendship is only part of his motivation and being talked about in a positive light is the first thing that comes to Hrut’s mind. Part of the reward for being a generous friend was developing a reputation as such.
\textsuperscript{242} Morris, Magnusson, 1891 (Bandamanna, CH 6)
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid, (Bandamanna, CH 2)
**Songs**

One especially interesting component of the Valley’s oral culture was the creation of songs. Faris does not go into detail on this subject, merely mentioning that the Cat Harbour residents were great song makers and that they used the form to tell of events both past, for instance famous storms and shipwrecks, and present, including the author’s own visit. However, Szwed recognizes songs as an important means of communication and expression. Songs censuring the actions of a community member, for example for being too proud, unmanly or overzealous in love, could act as a method of critiquing and controlling their behaviour. Anyone was able to compose and sing songs, but each generation produced a few song makers who were recognized as especially skilled; they commanded great respect and in some cases they would be given details of an event and asked to “song ‘em”. It is implied that the balladeers’ skill was the reason they were accorded special respect, but perhaps a fear of their verses’ power to celebrate or condemn had its own effect. It was considered improper for the subject to complain about a song and the longevity of these verses meant that descendants had to bear the burden of criticism as well. The damage which could be done by a disparaging verse is evidenced throughout the sagas, the song delivered by a beggar which drives a wedge between Cormac and his love, or the insulting poem requested by Hallgerd. Shame is compounded when criticism is put into verse because the message is more easily shared and remembered; the subject may be sure that the story will spread. For instance, the reference to Njáll as the ‘Beardless Carle’ in Sigmund’s verse is adopted into the public’s perception of his identity. Hallgerda continues to use the insulting nickname and it is even mentioned many years later by Flosi during his confrontation with Skarp Hedin. The shame of Njáll’s beardlessness is also carried by his sons who become known as ‘dung beardlings’ in reference to the insult made in Sigmund’s verse.

The songs, combined with the extensive use of nicknames in Codroy Valley, indicate the importance and inescapability of a family’s reputation. They may also help to explain the drastic action taken by many saga characters to uphold their family’s honour. The actions of every family member would have had consequences for the group as a whole, and would have

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244 Faris, 1972 (103)
245 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 97)
246 Ibid, (Private Cultures, 97-98) See also, Pocius, 1976 for an account of the gendered aspect of song creation. He studies a married couple who are both known for their skill as singers however, despite the fact that the wife is more skilled than her husband and knows many more ballads, she is accorded less respect.
247 Collingwood, Stefánsson, 1902 (CH 20, p114-115)
248 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 44, p114)
249 Ibid, (CH 44, p114)
250 Ibid, (CH 91, p199)
251 “…‘Old Beardless’, for few can tell just by looking at him whether he is a man or woman.” (Magnusson, and Pálsson 1975 (CH 123, p255))
continued to affect their descendants. Within a small community, even slight indiscretions could be remembered for several generations. Songs also served as an example of the communities’ values.\textsuperscript{252} Just as Njal’s beardlessness is considered worthy of poetic criticism, demonstrable masculinity is prized in his society but acting “high and mighty” is unacceptable in Codroy Valley where equality must be maintained.\textsuperscript{253} In both cases, songs are a format used to present and uphold social norms by censuring those who fail to comply with them.

**Reputation and Non-Persons**

The discussion surrounding reputation focuses on the social elite and the opinions which they held about each other. However, it may be that there are aspects of this discussion which have not been examined. I have argued that non-persons were too lowly to inspire emotion or strong personal feelings amongst the higher classes but it is possible that the elite attempted to foster a good reputation, not just amongst their peers, but also with the humble vagrant.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, *Information as a Commodity to Non-Persons*, it would have been worthwhile for the elite to develop relationships with wanderers and that generosity could have helped them to secure more reliable channels of communication. As well as creating ties with specific individuals, a generous householder could have acquired a reputation amongst the non-person community as whole. Travellers communicated with one another as well as with their hosts and if, for example, a vagrant, had heard good things about a particular household, they would naturally make their way there rather than to one which had a bad reputation or even one which they knew little about. The advantage to the household that was held in high esteem is obvious; they would have had significantly better access to information and all the advantages that came with it. Could this have inspired some kind of competition between households? Just as men tried to prove their wisdom at the law courts or displayed their wealth and prosperity at a feast to impress their equals, might they also have attempted to one up each other in the hospitality they showed non-persons? The same anxiety which is created by Thorarin’s squandered opportunity to improve his reputation amongst the social elite\textsuperscript{254} could have been felt by someone who had missed out on the chance to impress a beggar. If one household failed to offer payment for information, another would and a vagrant would always be willing to sell their wares to the highest bidder.

\textsuperscript{252} In this way songs act in a similar way to gossip as a form of social control, see Chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{253} Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 97)
\textsuperscript{254} Morris, Magnusson, 1891 (*Bandamanna*, CH 6), see above.
Contrary to the meanness demonstrated in the boarding laws, Hávamál advises that men cater to the needs of the poor. In reference to wanderers specifically, readers are told: “…growl not at guests, nor drive them from the gate, but show thyself gentle to the poor”. Other verses promote giving clothing to the naked, and treating wanderers with respect: “…hold not in scorn, nor mock in thy halls, a guest or wandering wight”. This line is especially interesting because it suggests that wanderers should be given the same hospitality as other guests. The reward for this type of generous behaviour is not stated, but it is said that these words will be a boon to the man who obeys them. Hávamál is not presenting charity as a selfless act, but rather as something which should be undertaken for personal gain. Do these verses suggest that wanderers were welcome guests because they had something to offer householders in return? Hávamál deals extensively with social conduct and its implications on a person’s reputation. Its values are represented in the sagas through the actions of their heroes and are, seemingly, most applicable to members of the social elite. However, these verses, in conjunction with the saga material, offer the possibility for expanding the discussion of honour and its implications in different levels of society.

**Information Exchange in Cat Harbour, Newfoundland**

As demonstrated in the examples above, setting and conversation structure are the two most important factors affecting vulnerability and the various opportunities for manipulation which information sharing presents. Both of these aspects can be studied in more detail using specific episodes from Newfoundland and Njála.

Faris’s detailed descriptions of the conventions of information exchange in Cat Harbour provide an excellent opportunity for comparison with saga conversations. News in Cat Harbour was usually received at, and disseminated from, a shop located in the middle of the settlement. This store, called Scarlet’s, was where outsiders tended to come first and male residents tried to visit at least once a day to hear “what [was] new”. Information gathered at Scarlet’s was then carried to smaller residential shops for further discussion. All news, except for that which was only interesting to women, would eventually reach these smaller shops. The man who was able to bring original news back to his local shop would take on a privileged position and capture the attention of his fellows. Women tended to avoid the shop, usually sending their children, and when it was necessary for them to visit, they refrained

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255 See *Movement and Boarding* in Chapter 1.
256 Bray, 1908, verse 134
257 Ibid, verse 49. A gift which is also permitted by the boarding laws (Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (192))
258 Ibid, verse 134
259 See also, Bauman, 1972 for information about the male-dominated verbal exchange at the general store on La Have Island, Nova Scotia and Chiaramonte, 1970 (14-15) for another example of this behaviour in Newfoundland including his description of the general store as a neutral area where men could meet without feeling that they were imposing on anyone or accruing any obligation or commitment to those present.
from speaking. However, they would listen intently to the men’s conversation and carried the information they had gathered away with them.\(^{260}\) In this way, as well as through children, shop information could also be spread to groups of women. These shop meetings are also alluded to by Szwed, but he does not detail the exchanges or their function in the community to the same extent as Faris.

The description of verbal exchange and the flow of information in Cat Harbour bears a striking resemblance to some saga episodes. As with other types of social interaction, there is a certain etiquette surrounding conversation and the manner in which information should be asked for and dispensed. Faris describes the process through which particularly interesting information was requested and received:

On the return from some noteworthy event…one or more of the men would…ask, “How was it out there old man?”, the reply to which was in practically every case, “Well I can’t begin to tell you everything that went on out there. We did it all, I tell you, we did it all.” This almost formal reply, of course, acts to preserve the store of information, especially if it were feeble to begin with, and thus maximize the interest and esteem of being able to relay, create or possess news. And it forces those of the shop to ask more questions to which the possessor would reply in detail if the audience seemed sufficiently attentive, though if it were clear that a detailed reply at this point could not be used to advantage, a short, curt answer would be given.\(^{261}\)

This formulaic and calculated conversational structure can also be observed in many of the saga episodes involving vagrants. Information was one of the very few commodities available to them and in order to profit by it they had to increase its value as much as possible. In the same manner as Newfoundland’s news bearers who wished to remain the centre of attention, vagrants would whet their audiences’ appetite for news and then prolong its telling, increasing the listeners’ interest and attentiveness through suspense. A good example of this type of information conservation occurs during a visit by some vagrants to Hlidarend:

The beggarwomen came to this room. Hallgerd greeted them and found seats for them, and asked them their news. They said they had nothing much to tell. Hallgerd asked where they had spent the night. They replied that they had been at Bergthorsknoll. “What was Njal doing?” asked Hallgerd. “He was busy sitting still,” they replied. “What were Njal’s sons doing?” asked Hallgerd. “They at least think themselves men.” “They look big enough but they’ve never been put to any test,” they replied. “Skarp-Hedin was sharpening his axe, Grim was putting a shaft on his spear, Helgi was riveting the hilt of his sword, and Hoskuld was strengthening the handle

\(^{260}\) Faris, 1966

\(^{261}\) Ibid, (141-142)
of his shield.”
“They must be planning some great feat,” said Hallgerd.
“We don’t know,” they said.
“What were Njal’s servants doing?” asked Hallgerd.
“We didn’t see what all of them were doing,” they replied, “but one of them was
carting dung to the hummocks in the field.”
“What was the point of that?” asked Hallgerd.
“He said it would make better hay.”

Although the women explicitly say that they have no news, Hallgerd is undeterred. She is
aware that their claim of having ‘nothing much to tell’ is simply a formality and does not
indicate an actual lack of information, however, she will have to ask for anything she
specifically wishes to know. The rest of the women’s conversation follows a rigid pattern of
questions and answers with the beggars volunteering very little extra information. The
vagrants have succeeded in gaining their listener’s attention and therefore their news is
valuable.

Not only did this form of conversation allow vagrants to demand a premium price for their
news, it is also evidence of a power shift. As shown by the conversation conventions in Cat
Harbour, the person in the position of ‘speaker’ was able to influence his listeners. Despite her
social position, Hallgerd is forced to conform to conversation guidelines set by lowly beggars.
The gongukona are in control of the situation and Hallgerd is not able to extract information
from them in the manner she would choose. As discussed in the previous chapter, Hallgerd’s
lack of mobility meant that she was dependent upon non-persons for access to information
and given the restrictions of her position she would have been unable to alter this unusual and
uneven power balance without risking her access to the communication channel created by the
vagrant women.

One cannot imagine a vagrant being the centre of attention under normal circumstances,
particularly in a room with a member of their community’s elite. However, during
information exchange it was possible for them to become the focus of conversation and this
position gave vagrants the opportunity to voice their beliefs, thus shaping the opinions and
responses of their audience. This is yet another way in which the inferior news carrier was
able to influence the thoughts and actions of their superiors, albeit not always intentionally. It
was also a way for non-persons to gain extra information, by gauging their listeners’
responses. It is interesting that beggars occasionally include their opinions when relating news,
but that those they converse with attempt to avoid doing so. Offering their own judgements
created an opportunity for determining another’s, simply by noting their response. For

262 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 44, p114)
instance, when the *gongukona* mention that Thrain Sigfusson and his companions are the most conceited people alive, they are subtly influencing Berghthora’s reception of their news as well as gaining new information from the housewife’s reaction. In this case, even neglecting to refute the beggar women’s claim may be interpreted as an expression of Berghthora’s own thoughts. By commenting with their own feelings, the *gongukona* place Berghthora in a position where it is impossible for her not to reveal a hint of her own. This tactic is yet another example of how vagrants were able to manipulate the social elite during conversation, and how their supposed superiors were powerless to prevent it.

**Settings for Communication**

In Newfoundland, Scarlet’s acted as the central location where information was discussed and from where it was disseminated. Due to the rather different settlement patterns in Iceland, there was no possibility for people to have daily access to a central location in the same way. For the Icelanders, social events such as assemblies, sporting events and feasts provided the framework for information sharing and acted as the focal point for the generation of news as well as a the centre of its distribution. However, rather than simplifying communication channels and the behaviour of exchange, these gatherings actually increased the necessity for information and created discussion both beforehand and afterwards.

**The Meetings and Assemblies of Newfoundland and Iceland**

The democratic Newfoundlanders held communal meetings just as the Icelanders did. Although generally called when there was something to be decided, rather than set for a specific time of year, there are similarities in the way that public meetings acted as a clearinghouse for, and generator of, information within these communities.

Informal oral communication was essential for the facilitation of the Newfoundlanders’ semi-formalised government. An interesting aspect of these local meetings is that the solutions to the matters which were the object of these gatherings were usually determined before they actually took place; the meeting then became a means of formalizing rather than making decisions. In order for members of the community to make a case for themselves or come to a consensus outside of the official system, informal oral communication was required as a basis for the development of people’s judgements and opinions.

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263 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 92, p291)
264 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures,109)
265 See also, Arno, 1980 (359) for an example of the communication system operating parallel to the legal system in a small Fijian settlement. He observed that the decision to bring a matter to court was often affected by the community’s opinion of oral information connected to the case.
Szwed believed that the practice of making judgements outside of meetings was a method for avoiding conflict:

If disagreements are predicted through gossip flow, there is created a fear that these will erupt during the formal proceedings of the meeting, for in such a setting the traditional processes of long-term gossip and community evaluation, as well as face-work possibilities, are sidestepped.266

Although final legal decisions in Iceland were made at the assembly there was certainly a lot of discussion about cases before they were presented before the court, both amongst those preparing to take part personally, and, it would seem, those who were simply observers interested in the outcome and related events. The same fear of conflict observed in Newfoundland’s legal customs can be seen in the Icelandic sagas, most notably in the court cases throughout Njála.

Codroy Valley’s meetings were characterised by an excessive amount of drinking, often causing problems for governing officials. This is a point of interest because it creates a connection between meetings and other social events and occasions. Szwed notes that it was essentially compulsory for men to drink if they wished to engage in social activities with other men; those who refrained were excluded and seen as unmanly. Drinking became an important part of social gatherings including weddings, funerals, dances and celebrations at Easter, Christmas and New Year’s Eve;267 and the similar conduct at meetings would include them in this group of social events. As with the Icelandic assemblies, the Valley’s meetings were more than just political, they were part of a broader range of social events and provided an opportunity for people to interact and exchange information which did not pertain to the gathering’s formal purpose.

Although the behaviour at Newfoundland’s meetings and Iceland’s assemblies identifies them as social events, these gathering did not decrease the need for gathering and discussing information in other settings. The cases brought to the Assembly were discussed and speculated upon beforehand, and their outcomes would have created interesting news for participants to carry home and circulate in their own communities. If anything, these large meetings created an even greater need for local communication and discussion.

The várthing (spring assembly) was the most important meeting of the year and its primary function was attending to legal cases. This gathering was held in May and lasted

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266 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 108); Szwed, 1966 (436-438) drinking acted as a levelling agent which gave people an excuse to meet and talk with one another. Similar observations of drinking as the major focus of conversation were made in Fiji by Arno, 1980 (354) and Brennies, 1984.

267 Ibid, (Private Cultures, 106)
approximately one week. By the mid-tenth century there were around twelve spring assemblies held throughout the country, each administered by three chieftains. In ca. 965 one more várthing was added along with three more chieftaincies. The Alþing was an annual meeting of every chieftain which took place every June and lasted for two weeks, dealing with matters which affected the entire county. It was attended not only by chieftains and their followers but by all kinds of people from across the land. Icelandic assemblies were held at set times and places every year except for the leið (fall assembly) which was called by each chieftain individually and mainly served to inform any of his followers who had not attended the Alþing of any developments which had occurred there.268

Important and exciting events created an increased desire for news and the interest of the general population in could be seen to be reflected in assembly attendance. For instance, the Thing during which the last holmgang was fought, “...was the third most thronged Thing that [had] been held in Iceland; the first was after Njal's burning, the second after the Heath-slaughters.”269 Many sagas are punctuated by assemblies and the events which take place there drive the rest of the narrative, inspire action and provide fodder for discussion for the remainder of the year. One can imagine that the feud which resulted in this final duel was a matter discussed throughout the island and that news from attendees of this Assembly would have been quite valuable. This same saga, Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu, hints at the extent to which news from the assembly could spread. For example, after returning from abroad, Gunnlaug receives news of a marriage which occurred during his absence; his informer mentions that he “...was anigh at the Thing when [the betrothal] was settled last summer.”270 It is hinted that this betrothal was talked about throughout the island, and its spread is directly connected to the dispersal of the meetings attendees: “And men rode home from the Althing. But this talk of Raven's wooing of Helga was nought hidden.”271 As well as creating a center from which information was disseminated, assemblies could also serve as a place where it was gathered. In Njála, news of Byrnjolf’s killing is received by Njal at the Alþing. The source of the information is not revealed; the news is merely described as ‘reaching’ the assembly where Njal asks to be told it three times.272

This episode is also interesting because it reveals several aspects of communication as dictated by gender and social status. The gender divisions in information transmission are demonstrated by the different ways that news of Brynjolf’s death reaches Njal, his wife

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268 Information on assemblies from Byock, 1988 (59-61)
269 Morris, Magnusson, 1901 (Gunnlaug, CH 14)
270 Ibid, (Gunnlaug, CH 12)
271 Ibid, (Gunnlaug, CH 10)
272 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 40, p108)
Bergthora and her enemy Hallgerd. It would seem that this news was being discussed at the assembly but that it was brought to Njal specifically because he is free to request that it be repeated to him several times. Perhaps this special treatment is due to his social position as well as his reputation for wisdom. Bergthora, on the other hand, learns what has happened directly from the murderer when he returns and speaks to her in her home. Similarly, Hallgerd is at home when she finds out about the crime from her shepherd. It is difficult to say whether news of the killing would have reached them so quickly had they not both been personally involved in the event. Of importance is the fact that the two women are not able to attend the assembly and therefore are unable to use the information which they have learned, they are not in a position to discuss it nor can they take any action without the help of their men who are away from home.

Bergthora and Hallgerd are both powerful, married women and cannot leave their responsibilities in order to attend assemblies. However, there is saga evidence that other types of women did attend, although they naturally had a less prominent role in the legal proceedings, and therefore, often less to do with the narrative as well. It is possible that being at the assembly gave women the opportunity to gather, share news and form relationships with one another. Similarly, the assembly could be used as a meeting place for unmentioned non-persons. The assembly’s predictable time and location would have been ideal for wanderers who wished to meet but had no reliable way of contacting each other. Just as the shepherds who met and exchanged news formed a communication network, the assembly would have acted as a place of exchange for groups of vagrants. It would also have been the perfect place for non-persons to share information with their superiors. At the assembly they would have had access to some of the most powerful members of society, combined with the convenience of being able to walk back and forth between their booths with ease. Although the laws sought to limit the attendance of vagrants it seems unlikely that this group would have been deterred from participating in these gatherings as they represented one of the most important centres of communication in the country. Their presence would also have been useful to other attendees who wanted to learn about what was going on in their neighbour’s booths.

The high level of interest in assemblies also made the people there vulnerable. For instance, legal exchanges were carried out in public and the actions and reactions of those participating could be observed by everyone there, and presumably would soon be common knowledge throughout the land. Wisdom and legal prowess were exhibited and reliable access to

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273 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 39, p108)
274 “Kvinne…kunne ikke delta på tingene” (Sigurðsson, 2008 (21))
information could help powerful men make a good impression. Naturally a lack of knowledge could also make men appear foolish or ill-advised. As well, many conversations took place in front of an audience and this would have made it impossible for people not to react to others’ words. For example, when Skarp-Hedin accuses Thorkel of engaging in embarrassing behaviour, it is in front of the entire assembly, making it impossible for Thorkel to ignore the insult without accruing further shame. Similarly, when Flosi rejects the reparations made by Njal and his sons, he does so very publicly. The setting of his decision means that he cannot change his mind and, equally, the Njaslssons are forced to react to the affront.

**Feasts**
The fixed occasion of the assembly provided the framework within which other events could be planned and agreed upon. Friends could arrange to visit one another in the coming year, and times for the wedding feasts could be decided of those who were betrothed during the proceedings. Such feasts were a chance for friends to meet and exchange news and the reciprocal nature of invitation meant that they created further opportunities for gathering together. However, tensions could also run high during these celebrations and friendships might turn sour during the course of a feast. It is certain that the actions of both friends and enemies at these events generated news which those in attendance would bring home for further discussion.

At meals a chieftain or a household head became available to his friends, family, servants and to any visitors. This was an opportunity for him to learn new information and it was also a chance for his followers to have access to him. For example, mealtimes are often presented as the backdrop for female goading, for instance, when Hildigunnr takes advantage of the setting, both familiar and public, to make her lament. In a similar way, meals were also an occasion

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275 The vulnerability of assembly conversation is emphasised by the *Grágás* law that personal compensation was doubled for any insults exchanged at the General Assembly (Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (182)). This topic will be discussed further in the final section of this thesis under the heading *The Legality of Speech*.

276 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 120, p249).

277 Ibid, (CH 123, p255-256). See also Faris, 1972 (103) for recognition of the especial vulnerability of those in powerful positions. In Cat Harbour, taking up a leadership position was undesirable because people did not like making decisions that infringed on others, something which was considered aggressive and offensive. People were wary of putting themselves forward because it exposed them to criticism and conjecture.

278 See Miller, 2014 for his reading of *Njála* with close attention paid to importance of the events which take place at the feasts which punctuate the narrative. For example, all of Njal and Gunnar’s problems begin when their wives argue about seating arrangements at a feast and Gunnar unwittingly seals his own fate when he offends Hallgerd by slapping her in front of their guests at another.

279 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 116, p238-240). For an in-depth analysis of this scene see, Clover, 1986. Also, Borovsky, 1999 (16-18) for examples of women using feasts and mealtimes as a setting for oral ‘performance’. As noted by both Clover and Borovsky, women were able to control the private setting of meals within their own homes. This made it possible for them to use various aspects of the meal as part of their message. For instance, the place settings, Hildigunnr’s presentation of a torn and ragged towel for Flossi to dry his hands with, or even the food, the singed sheep heads and feet served by Gudrun to remind her sons of the burning of their household
which non-persons could use to gain an audience with the head of a household. In Njala, Lyting holds a feast and the reader is told that:

On the day of the feast, Lyting spent most of his time outside, only occasionally going inside the house. Finally he took his seat at the table; then a woman came in from the outside and said, “You men should have been outside just now to see...Hoskuldnjaltsson has just ridden past.”

Once Lyting is seated, the unnamed woman is able to pass on information to him. This woman’s identity is not given. Perhaps she is employed on the farm or maybe she is a wanderer who happened to be passing by and was able to use her news to gain entry to the house during a meal; either way it can be assumed that she is not someone to whom Lyting was generally readily available. The mealtime setting is well suited to both the non-person and their audience; the first is ensured food and temporary shelter in return for their information, and the second is at ease, free from other duties and able to talk. An episode which I have referenced many times, that involving the conversation between Hrut and Huckster Hedinn, is notable for its location as well its dialogue. Hrut invites Hedinn to his table, presenting the meal as a time for exchange when normal social boundaries were relaxed, creating a space for wanderers and social leaders to interact.

Feasts were an occasion when people would be ensured of the household head’s presence. This could be beneficial, for instance, it gave him a chance to discuss information with his family and householders, as well as visitors for whom feasts naturally provided the opportunity for conversation. People from outside a household who wished to speak with its leader would know when and where to find him. However, it was also a time when powerful men’s behaviour in the private and familiar setting of their own home could be studied by visitors with potentially harmful results. For instance, in Þórðar saga hredú, Þórðr is at home for Yule when an argument with his wife in which his plans are revealed is overheard by a vagrant and the information is passed on to his enemy. The household setting leaves Þórðr doubly vulnerable, both to the goading of his wife, which provokes him to speak in an unguarded fashion, and to the watchfulness of boarding wanderers. In his own home, Þórðr is the main focus of attention and his actions are of particular note to visitors.

(Borovsky, 1999 (16)). Further reading about female participation through the serving of food, the symbolism of different dishes and the use of mealtimes by saga authors is found in Martínez Pizarro, 1986.

280 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 98, p212)
281 Ibid, (CH 22, p77 -78)
282 For further discussion of the episodes involving Lyting and Hrut, see the section on whetting under Harmful Uses of Information below.
283 Coles, 1882 (Þórðr Hreða, CH 9)
The Home
Although most episodes involving obvious vulnerability involve men, it was also a risk which was experienced by powerful women. Most often women met with non-persons within their homes and at unscheduled times. In this way, the vulnerability of housewives is frequently even greater than that of their husbands. Unlike men, women were dependant on the unplanned visits of non-persons and were therefore unable to dictate the time or setting of their interactions. If a wanderer happened to come by their home, a housewife was required to let them in or risk losing the opportunity to converse with them. In these exchanges the vagrants had the upper hand; they had information that was available to the housewives through no other channel. In this case the setting acts as a further signifier of vulnerability; the housewife must allow a stranger into her personal space perhaps with little time to prepare herself or her surroundings.

It is also clear that simply showing a vagrant hospitality was not enough to secure their good favour or buy their silence. The vagrant boy who spends the night at Miklibær in Þóðar saga hreðu overhears a discussion between the housewife and her husband, the details of which he does not hesitate to carry to their enemy.284 The young man has entered the private sphere, the realm of the housewife, and has exploited his position there to betray his hosts for personal gain. Similarly, it is implied that the beggar women who report to Hallgerd spent the previous evening boarding at Bergthorsknoll, the home of her rival.285

Sporting Events
Competitive sporting events such as wrestling, swimming, ball games (knáttleikr) and horse fights (hestavíg) also provided an opportunity for people to gather together, not only for the participating men but also for the, often female, spectators. These activities gave usually housebound women a chance to meet and talk with one another, form friendships and relay information.286 Unfortunately, the saga authors devoted little effort to describing the behaviour of these female spectators, unless, of course, they were interacting with a man. Sporting activities were an opportunity for women and men from different households to speak with one another. For instance, in Hallfreðar saga vandreaðaskálds, a group of women gathers to watch a ball game and one woman, Valgerður, uses this opportunity to strike up conversation, and begin a courtship, with Ingófr, a man of her own choosing.287 The informal ‘playful’ nature of sporting events may have had an effect on the nature of information that was shared and the way in which people interacted. People may have felt more at ease and

284 Coles, 1882 (Thórðr Hreða, CH 9)
285 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 44, p114)
286 Many of the examples, although discussed in a different context, of saga games and sports used hereafter were found with the help of Martin, 2003
287 Hallfreðar saga vandreaðaskálds (CH 2)
there appears to have been a relaxation of social norms, perhaps evidenced by the confidence with which Valgerður begins a relationship with someone her father disapproves of. It is also noteworthy that this relationship later fails when the accepted hierarchy is re-established; Valgerður and Ingólf are not of the same social class. A crowd of onlookers is mentioned at a horse fight in Bjarnar saga hítdælakappa, indicating that these gatherings attracted spectators as well.\footnote{Bjarnar saga hítdælakappa (CH 23) \footnote{Press, 1880 (CH 40) \footnote{Morris, Magnusson, 1901 (Gunnaaug, CH 12) \footnote{For example the horse fight at Longfit in Grettis saga \footnote{Bray, 1908, verse 123}}}} In Laxdelja saga, a game in which swimmers compete to hold each other under the water gives Kjarten the opportunity to establish a friendship with King Olaf Tryggvason.\footnote{Press, 1880 (CH 40) \footnote{Morris, Magnusson, 1901 (Gunnaaug, CH 12) \footnote{For example the horse fight at Longfit in Grettis saga \footnote{Bray, 1908, verse 123}}} The men meet as swimmers, hence Olaf is not wearing the fine clothing which would normally identify him as Kjarten’s superior (it is mentioned that he dresses after the match). Under these circumstances they are able to compete as equals and Kjarten’s abilities impress the king who later becomes his benefactor. Just as in Halfeðr saga, social conventions are relaxed or become unclear in the context of sport. This equalising effect of sporting events made them an ideal place for the exchange of information. A similar situation arises in Gunnlaugs saga ormsgungu, when Gunnlaug engages in a wrestling match with a stranger who later informs him that his betrothed has been promised to another.\footnote{Press, 1880 (CH 40) \footnote{Morris, Magnusson, 1901 (Gunnaaug, CH 12) \footnote{For example the horse fight at Longfit in Grettis saga \footnote{Bray, 1908, verse 123}}}

The setting of ball games and horse fights may have been rather casual but their competitive nature created tension and serious animosity between the participants, particularly those who already had an uneasy relationship with one another.\footnote{Press, 1880 (CH 40) \footnote{Morris, Magnusson, 1901 (Gunnaaug, CH 12) \footnote{For example the horse fight at Longfit in Grettis saga \footnote{Bray, 1908, verse 123}}} Like any other social interaction there was a potential for losing face, only in this context people’s actions were subject to the scrutiny and conjecture of everyone present.

Although not mentioned in the sagas, it is possible that wanderers would have been present at sporting events. There were no Grágás laws attempting to prevent vagrants from attending these activities although it seems unlikely that it would have been appropriate for them to have actively participated. What is more probable is that they would have taken this opportunity to observe the way people behaved, who they interacted with and what was said. The informal atmosphere would have encouraged people to relax their guarded behaviour and it is reasonable to assume that this vulnerability generated plenty of information.

**Harmful Uses of Information**

Not only were strong personal relationships necessary for maintaining political power, Hávamál describes communication between friends in terms of a basic human need: “There is mingling in friendship when man can utter all his whole mind to another…”\footnote{Bray, 1908, verse 123} and “…care
shall gnaw thy heart if thou canst not tell all thy mind to another". Openness and honesty are at the heart of a strong friendship; equally, a false friend is defined as one who does not reveal his true self in conversation. Surprisingly, the guidelines pertaining to discussion do not condemn trickery, in some cases it is actually promoted it in order to achieve one’s own end in an treacherous relationship: “…speak him fair, but falsely think…” Furthermore, in an inversion of the open generosity between friends, conversation is once again equated with gift giving but this time its absence is a signifier of hidden animosity: “Yet further of him whom thou trusted ill, and whose mind thou dost misdoubt; thou shalt laugh with him but withhold thy thought, for gift with like gift should be paid”.

An inability to successfully navigate social situations could betray an individuals’ thoughts and secrets and also expose them to public disdain for their naivety: “The unwise man weens all who smile and flatter him are his friends, nor notes how oft they speak him ill when he sits in the circle of the wise”. The ‘unwise man’ does not appear to be so much an object of pity as one of scorn. Similarly, one who is foolish enough to be taken in by a false friend is at fault for being overly trusting: “Tell not ever an evil man if misfortunes thee befall, from such ill friend thou needst never seek return for thy trustful mind”.

In order to form the deep friendships so important to the medieval Icelander, one had to be prepared to act in an open and honest manner. However, this behaviour left one vulnerable and wisdom was required to determine the sincerity of a friend or informer.

**Guile**

Gunnar’s aforementioned deception of Hrut demonstrates how information exchanges could be manipulated in order to trap and control others. Intelligence and wisdom are unarguably positive traits, however, the sagas also present us with episodes which involve the negative use of information where the perpetrator is very often portrayed as guileful and deceptive. If knowledge can be used to secure and maintain the power of the sagas’ heroes, it can also be used to further the malicious plans of their enemies.

*Njála*’s villain, Mord, exploits his friendships as well as contacts with non-persons in order to gather information which he then uses to harm others. As a godi he has access to information and an understanding of the law and his actions provide an example of how knowledge can be misused. Mord does not actively seek out opportunities to cause damage, but takes advantage

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293 Bray, 1908, verse 120
294 Ibid, verse 45
295 Ibid, verse 46
296 Ibid, verse 24. The same message with a slight variation is also presented in verse 25.
297 Ibid, verse 116
of the information available to him when the occasion arises. For instance, when Hallgerd
steals from another household, Mord employs non-persons in order to prove that she is
guilty.\textsuperscript{298} In this episode he demonstrates not only the ability of powerful men to use non-
persons as their envoys, but also the necessity of it. Mord uses the information gleaned by his
travelling women to make his enemy, Gunnar, suffer. Mord also uses knowledge gained from
his friends to control others and further his own ambitions. For example, following the advice
of his equally wily father, he ingratiates himself with the Njallssons and becomes their trusted
advisor. Mord then exploits this position to manipulate the flow of information and dupe the
Njallsons into killing their own foster brother.\textsuperscript{299} As well, despite his secret animosity towards
Gunnar, Mord is trusted by him and is therefore privy to information which Gunnar’s
recognised enemies are not. Mord himself brags about this power to Skamkell and his
companions when they seek his counsel, saying, “I know a thing or two about Gunnar’s
household that neither of you know.”\textsuperscript{300} Mord’s access to information gives him influence
over Skamkell and the ability to use him as a tool to his own advantage. Mord later uses his
connection to Gunnar to betray him to his enemies:

\begin{quote}
In the autumn Mord Valgard's son, sent word that Gunnar was alone at home, for all
his men had gone down to the Land-Isles to finish the hay-making…All those who
pledged themselves to make an attack on Gunnar met there and discussed how best to
do it. Mord said that they would never take Gunnar unawares unless they forced the
neighbouring farmer…to go with them, and then made him go up to Hlidarend alone
to catch the dog, Sam.\textsuperscript{301}
\end{quote}

Not only does Mord alert Gunnar’s slayers to the fact that he is home alone he also instructs
them how best to attack by sharing his knowledge of the layout and workings of the farmstead,
down to the presence, and even the name, of the dog.

**Non-Persons as Whetters**
Non-persons where able to control their superiors’ behaviour by forcing them to guard their
speech and actions, however, it is also possible that this lowly class influenced and provoked
the elite with their words.

Within the Íslendingasögur, goading women, classified as the Hetzerin by Rolf Heller,\textsuperscript{302} are
often used as an example of female power, using provocative speech as a means of accessing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{298} Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 49, p124)
\item \textsuperscript{299} Ibid, (CH 108-110, p228-232)
\item \textsuperscript{300} Ibid, (CH 49, p124)
\item \textsuperscript{301} Ibid, (CH 76, p168)
\item \textsuperscript{302} Heller, 1958
\end{itemize}
a male dominated society. Their precise tactics and motives vary, but the episodes in which they act employ a fairly formulaic structure. In order to incite action, women shame men by comparing them to women, accusing them of cowardice or neglect of kinship obligations or by threatening to carry out take on the man’s role themselves. Tokens, most frequently the bloodied clothing of the deceased, are often produced as a part of the goading scene. The whetter challenges the man to defend his masculinity and uphold his familial responsibilities. In most cases, these tactics are remarkably effective, and despite their frequent displeasure, the harassed man agrees to carry out the woman’s wishes. The ability of the Hetzerin to influence society hinges on the societal definition of honour and the importance assigned to it by both genders.

Carol Clover believes that there is a social reality behind the character of the Hetzerin but that the literature does not allow for a realistically complex depiction. According to Clover, the common ethic regarding revenge would have naturally applied to women as well as men, and she believes that they were actually expected to take on the role of goader. Furthermore, the tendency of women to reject official legal action can be explained by their removal from the legal system which would have made settlement through successful prosecution unsatisfactory to them. Whetting provided women with the opportunity to involve themselves in family politics and honour.

*Njála* serves as the perfect example of the demonization of goading women and the social anxieties tied to violent male reactions. By Heller’s estimation, the saga contains fifteen of the fifty-one goading episodes within the sagas. When recalculated by Jenny Jochens, who increased the number of goadings in *Njála* to thirty-one and decreased the overall total to forty-seven or forty-eight, events in *Njála* account for 48% of whetting incidents. It is perhaps no coincidence that the saga which contains the most significant number of female goaders is the one in which female vagrants also appear.

303 Firstly, it is important to note that, although the female goader is a common trope, not all active saga females fall into this category. Many women in the Old Norse tradition are associated with wisdom, indeed it seems to be among the most esteemed female virtues (Friðriksdóttir, 2013) However, very few of these wise and peaceful women are found in the *Íslendingasögur*, the material upon which the stereotype of the female whetter is based, and in which the *gongukona* appear.

304 Friðriksdóttir, 2013 (17)  
305 Heller, 1958 (99)  
306 It has also been argued that the Hetzerin may have been a fictional figure employed by male storytellers as scapegoats, shouldering the responsibility for the devastation caused by feuds. (Jochens, 1996; Anderson, 2002) There is convincing evidence to support this claim, but it is still worth considering whether the figure of the destructive and unlucky woman could have been created in, and hold meaning for, a society which did not already contain an element of this negative view of women. The non-persons’ use of goading may help to support the theory that it was a real historical form of interaction for women as well.

307 Clover, 1986 (144 - 174), Borovsky, 1999  
308 Heller, 1958 (98)  
309 Jochens, 1996 (192)
Goading was a channel through which seemingly powerless women could exert their influence and it is reasonable to expect that non-persons would have employed it as well. Just as women, non-persons were often excluded from the formal channels which powerful men used to express themselves within the community.

The news delivered by the shepherds and vagrants in the Íslendingasögur is often the impetus for action, but to what extent can these figures be considered whetters? Friðriksdóttir considers whetting to be a speech act which requires the speaker to be ‘qualified’ to perform it, for example by their social status or legitimate authority.\(^\text{310}\) By this definition, neither beggars nor shepherds could be said to be ‘qualified’ whetters of their superiors, yet their speech has a very similar effect to that of the aristocratic and royal women most associated with the technique. However, Sigurðsson notes that, almost without exception, the men and women who goad others are less powerful than those they wish to provoke and that their speech is a way for them to engage in the power game.\(^\text{311}\) If this observation is taken to an extreme it would be reasonable to include non-persons as potential goaders, the only difference may be that their intentions are often unclear. In the sagas, whetting is used by women as a tool to advance their personal or political objectives and despite having different motives vagrants and shepherds could be said to do the same.\(^\text{312}\)

In the conversations between shepherds and their masters there is no indication that the messenger is attempting to shame their employer in any way or to encourage a specific action. However, most often they relay their information to men who are described as being in the company of others; the information, and those who are party to it, then becomes common knowledge. The importance of the public space in provoking action has been documented by Carol Clover who notes that many goading women make use of mealtimes as an opportunity to have public access to a man.\(^\text{313}\) When a man publically receives information or, in the case of goading, perhaps an insult, they are obliged to react and they do so with the knowledge that the rest of society will be awaiting their chosen response. It is in this way that the shepherd becomes the unintentional whetter; by sharing information they force their audience into taking action.

\(^{310}\) Friðriksdóttir, 2013 (19)  
\(^{311}\) Sigurðsson, 2008 (84)  
\(^{312}\) For a discussion of ‘Information Passing’ as a form of feud advocacy, see Byock, 1982 (93-96). Among other types of information carriers, Byock touches briefly upon the idea of beggars as a narrative device and their role in the advancement of feuds. He also references the episode in which a washerwoman can be interpreted as a goader in Hrafnkels saga Feysgoda, identifying a link between information sharing, goading and lowly householders. Byock’s treats this example and these ideas primarily as tools used to steer the narrative. In the case of the washerwoman, he sees her information passing/goading as a tactic used by the saga author to reignite a feud which has lain dormant for some time.  
\(^{313}\) Clover, 1986 (149)
When shepherds deliver news they may do so with the expectation of an unspecified reaction, this is natural considering that they function as messengers or voluntary carriers of important information. However, the response of their audience is not affected by the shepherd; they do not feel compelled by the shepherd himself to act in a certain way. The deeds based on shepherd’s news may have negative consequences but the act of delivering the information is treated as positive despite being a form of goading. The shepherd is simply loyal, without a personal motive.

Unlike shepherds, it appears that the instances of beggars goading their superiors are intentional, not just a consequence of setting. Vagrants are eager to get a reaction out of their audience; provoking them into speech or action creates fresh news and renews the flow of information.

For instance, when Huckster Hedinn desires legal information from Hrut, he first shames him by unfavourably comparing his knowledge of the law with Mord’s. In the same breath, Huckster Hedinn reminds Hrut of his personal quarrel with Mord: “I happen to know that Mord took your wife away from you and you could do nothing about it.” Here Hedinn has employed the very same tactics as the Hezerin; he is challenging Hrut’s masculinity by reminding him that he was too cowardly to keep his wife and adding his personal opinion that the person who stole her away is a better man: “…that Mord was so clever, and so experienced a lawyer, that his chieftainship was quite faultless.” Both wisdom and leadership are masculine qualities, and by suggesting that Mord is Hrut’s superior in both simply adds insult to injury. It is very clear that Huckster Hedinn knows all about the animosity between Hrut and Mord and that he brings up Mord’s knowledge of the law specifically for the purpose of discussing this personal quarrel. The result is that Hrut, despite being a very prominent and powerful man, feels the need to prove his legal knowledge to the lowly Huckster Hedinn, as well as all who were present and overheard the insult, and is tricked into summoning himself to court.

In other episodes involving whetting wanderers, their motives are far less clear. In Þórðar saga hreðu, a vagrant boy brings news to Þverá:

Össurr said: What was the hero, Thórðr the Terror, doing? The boy said: Certainly can you call him a hero, considering how disgracefully you have fared before him; but nothing did I see him do, except to rivet the clinch of his sword. But this I heard

314 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 22, p77)
315 Ibid, (CH 22, p77) Specifically noting the masculine trait of wisdom is of especial interest when considered in connection with the discussion on the Reputation of Knowledge in the previous chapter. Once again, wisdom and knowledge are signifiers of manliness.
Thórhallr say, that they intended fetching hay from the stack-yards within three nights. Össurr says: How many men are they likely to muster?” The boy answers: No more than Thórðr, and Eyvindr, and Thórhallr. Well do you say, my boy, says Össurr. Thereupon he got twelve men to follow him, and they all rode to Óslandshlíð.316

The boy blatantly insults Össurr, once again using the Hezerin’s method of attacking masculinity, this time by comparing him to his enemy Thórðr, and reminding him of his past disgrace. In this case it is difficult to say whether Össurr’s decision to gather his men is in any way prompted by the young lad’s insult; certainly his comments did not improve the already tense situation. This example also leads the reader to question why the vagrant felt the need to insult Össurr in the first place. What did he stand to gain? Was it an attempt to gauge Össurr’s reaction and have him respond in a certain way? Are we meant to believe that his choice to ride out really was affected by the beggar’s speech? Either way, it seems that the vagrant’s personal attack encouraged Össurr to make a quick decision.

A similar case of seemingly purposeless goading is found in Njála. An unspecified woman, possibly a vagrant, comes into Lyting’s home to tell him:

“You men should have been outside just now to see that peacock riding past the farm.”
“What peacock are you talking about?” asked Lyting. “Hoskuld Njalsson has just ridden past,” replied the woman. “He often rides past the farm,” said Lyting, “and I find it a constant provocation. I make an offer here and now, Hoskuld Thrainsson, to ride with you if you want to avenge your father and kill Hoskuld Njalsson.”317

It seems that this woman purposefully creates the image of a proud Hoskuld, as if to suggest his riding past the farm is in some way offensive. Her ploy certainly works because it instantly urges Lyting into action; he proposes that they leave immediately to kill him! Lyting mentions that Hoskuld rides past the farm often, why then is this the occasion upon which he decides to act? The reason may lie in the words of the anonymous woman; she has goaded him into facing the situation, perhaps also shaming him for neglecting to act sooner. It is noteworthy that this exchange occurs during a meal when the household would have been gathered together. Everyone would have heard the woman’s words and looked to Lyting for a response. This scene bears many similarities to those involving the gongukona and it may be that this woman simply wanted to provoke a reaction and did not specifically intend to inspire murder.

316 Coles, 1882 (Thórðr Hreða CH 9)
317 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 98, p212)
In another instance involving a lowly whetting woman in connection with a household, an anonymous washerwoman’s words inspire her master into action against his enemies. A lowly householder in *Hrafnkels saga Feysgoda* challenges her master Hrafnkell’s masculinity in the same manner as a woman of his own station might, saying that he has grown old and cowardly, questioning his inability to uphold his honour and comparing him to other men who have surpassed him in greatness. Perhaps surprisingly, Hrafnkell agrees with his servant, and, like other men who have been goaded, decides to act despite acknowledging that she did not mean “anything good thereby” in her speech.\(^{318}\) This episode is particularly interesting because it challenges the monotonous depiction of the loyal shepherd, a householder who acts only out of a desire to do good. This washerwoman is connected to a specific household but she uses her position to purposefully goad her master rather than unintentionally in the manner of shepherds. It seems very likely that her negative depiction is tied to her gender; but why would the saga author have chosen to have a hero be whetted by a servant? Could it be that despite their anonymity, non-persons were still concerned with the reputation of their masters and the way in which their prestige served to represent everyone connected with him?

The actions of this serving woman bring up the question of whetting and responsibility. She is not blamed for her speech nor is she punished for its result. Those elite women who represent the traditional definition of whetters were not held directly responsible for the outcome of the actions they inspired either, however, they were still connected with these deeds in the minds of their community. For example, Hallgerd is never forced to atone for the deaths of her husbands, and the revenge which is taken affects her male relations and not herself personally, however, she develops a reputation for being a dangerous and unreasonable woman. Her second husband is warned “…that she contrived her [first] husband’s death”\(^{319}\) and even her own father warns her third suitor that she is not necessarily a wise match.\(^{320}\)

For non-persons there is an even further disconnect between whetting and its outcome than there is for the social elite who goad their own family members. Considering the nature of the news which they impart it should come as no surprise when action is based upon it, but that is not the beggar’s concern. Unlike the shepherds who are personally connected with the people who react to their news, the vagrants’ association ends after their information has been delivered. Vagrants trade news for personal gain but their motive does not affect the basic content of their news, only the way in which it is conveyed. Although beggars could be said to act selfishly, they do not deliver information with the view of creating a personally favourable result. Nevertheless, beggars act as Hetzerin by conveying news, sometimes

\(^{318}\) Coles, 1882 (Hrafnkel, CH 17)
\(^{319}\) Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 13, p64)
\(^{320}\) Ibid, (CH 33, p94)
tempered with extra information which is included in order to pique their listener’s interest and inspire them to react.

Unlike the elite Hetzerin, it would have been difficult to identify guilty individuals amongst groups of vagrants making it much easier for an anonymous beggar-woman to shake off a bad reputation than the ‘unlucky’ Hallgerd. Information carriers may be viewed simply as a mechanism that provided others with the grounds or motivation to act. However, the way in which the göngukona are represented betrays an underlying malicious character which points to scapegoatism, at least within the context of the saga.

The necessity to assign guilt, and the proposed preference for female scapegoats, could help to explain the frequent use of beggar women in Njála. It has been noted that this saga is the most striking example of the tendency within Old Norse literature to treat men individually and women generically\(^\text{321}\) and it is also the primary example of the anonymous göngukona. It is important to ask why the author chose to employ women rather than the male beggars who are preferred in almost every other saga. This may be a reflection of the slight variation between the actions performed by wanderers of different genders; these women are not messengers but independent news carriers. However, the uniquely high number of Hetzerin within Njála suggests that the author made this choice with the intent of placing blame; there is an unmistakably negative portrayal of women throughout the narrative.

**Voluntary Vagrancy**

Although the life of a wanderer does not appear to be particularly desirable, the power they wielded may have made it appealing to some. There are episodes within the sagas that suggest it was a lifestyle which some people actually chose. One such case is found in Haensna-Póris saga when the reader is introduced to a wanderer by the name of Vidfari:

Thorwald, the son of Odd-a-Tongue…fared from the north to go see his father and abode a night at Northtongue in good cheer. Now there was a man guesting there already, called Vidfari, a gangrel man who went from one corner of the land to the other; he was nigh akin to Thorir, and like to him in mind and mood. So that same evening he gathered up his clothes and took to his heels, and ran away and stayed not till he came to Thorir, who welcomed him with open arms, saying “Surely something good will come to me of thy homing.” He answered: “That may well be, for now is Thorwald Oddson come to Northtongue, and is a-guesting there now.” Said Thorir: “I thought I saw some good coming to me from thine hands, so well was all with me!”\(^\text{322}\)

\(^\text{321}\) Clover, 1986 (145)

\(^\text{322}\) Morris, Magnusson, 1891 (Haensna-Póris, CH 7)
This character stands out immediately as he is a rare example of a named vagrant. In the Icelandic, he is described as *reikunarmaðr*, a wandering beggar, and his very name connects his entire identity to movement, yet he has a wealthy kinsman who he is on very good terms with. When hastening to meet Thorir, the author mentions specifically that he gathers up his clothes, suggesting that they are his only worldly possessions. This is significant as clothing is the one item which people are permitted to give to those legally defined as vagrants. Vidfari is treated as an equal by Thorir and is greeted by him with exceptional warmth; these men are more than just kinsmen, they are also friends. Vidfari seems keenly aware of a duty to assist Thorir, not resting until he can deliver his news and apparently expecting nothing in return for his efforts. Certainly, having a wanderer as a close friend is an advantage for Thorir and he makes no attempt to hide his connection to Vidfari. When he later rides out to meet Thorwald, he brings the vagrant with him as one of his two companions. Given the circumstances, it would seem that Vidfari became a vagrant of his own volition and does not desire to change his condition; had he wished for Thorwald’s assistance in doing so there is no apparent reason why he should be denied. This entire scenario brings up the question of whether the position of the vagrant might have been beneficial not only to individuals but families as well. Could a vagrant relation have been an asset? The laws concerning dependency would indicate that the rest of society resented and looked down on a family which did not look after its own, something which would have had a negative effect on their reputation and possibly their social standing as a result. Was it possible, however, that the advantages of a loyal source within the vagrant community outweighed the shame of having a ‘perverse’ relative? Unfortunately, the limited information within the sagas makes it impossible to answer these questions but it is nevertheless important to consider the different types of relationships that could have existed between persons and non-persons and the effect these connections had on different channels of communication.

Another interesting character appears in *Bandamanna saga*:

[Thormód] met a man. He was large and uncouth looking, ugly and unprepossessing in appearance. About him he had a cloak which was sewed together of many tatters, as crinkly as a sheep’s stomach, with a hood on it of the same kind, lousy all over. Thormód asked him who he was, He answered: “My name is Oddi.” Thormód said: “What is your business?” He answered: “I am a serf and I am called Louse Oddi. I don’t care to work, but I

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323 Morris, Magnusson, 1891 (*Hænsna-ðóris*, CH 7)
324 *Fara* means ‘to go’ (*Zoëga*, 2004)
325 Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (192)
326 Morris, Magnusson, 1891 (*Hænsna-ðóris*, CH 8)
327 *Göngumáður* in the Icelandic
am no liar, nor a fool, either, and good people always treat me well. What is your name?” Thormóđ answered: “I am a called Torráð.”
Oddi asked: “And what kind of person are you, Torráð?”
He answered: “I am a merchant. How about trading with me, Oddi?”
He replied: “I have nothing to trade. What would you trade with me?”
“I want to have the cloak you are wearing.”
Oddi said “You don’t need to make fun of me.”
Thormóđ said: “I don’t mean to make fun of you. Let me give you my cloak, and let me have yours and deliver my message to Stockness and get there by evening. Tell Skúf and Biarni that you met a man today who called himself Torráð and that he exchanged clothes with you. There is no other message. You may keep my cloak if you deliver this message.”
Oddi answered: “It isn’t an easy matter to get across the firth…still, I may manage to do so and get to Stockness this evening.”
They exchanged cloaks, Oddi put on the black one, and Torráð the ragged one. Then Thormóđ went to the Einars Firth and encountered a shepherd of Thordís on Longness. He asked him whether the sons of Thordís were at home. The shepherd answered: “Bodvar is not at home, but his brothers were here last night; but now they are out rowing to catch fish.”
Thormóđ said: “Very likely.”
The shepherd thought he was talking to Louse Oddi. Then they parted…

After his conversation with the shepherd, Thormóđ makes his way to the boat house where he lies in wait for the brothers to return, killing them upon their arrival and shedding his disguise in the process. This passage contains many interesting elements including a male vagrant being employed as a messenger, a beggar’s cloak being used as a disguise and an interaction between the false beggar and a shepherd. It is also an example of someone who has apparently made the decision to become a vagrant, preferring the hardships and uncertainty of begging to work. He fits the legal definition for perverse vagrancy. The description of his physical appearance betrays a prejudice towards vagrants; he is abnormal in that he is notably large and ugly, his unattractive and unnatural behaviour. However, he describes himself as an honest and intelligent person and does not

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328 It is notable that Oddi makes reference to his own intelligence, indicating that wisdom was a desirable trait amongst non-persons as well as their superiors. It is reasonable to expect that a wise and trustworthy information carrier would be paid more handsomely than a foolish one.
329 Hollander, 1949 (CH 2, p155)
330 This conversation is also relevant to the discussion of communication networks formed by the movements of shepherds and vagrants in Chapter 2’s sections on Shepherds as Information Carriers and Vagrants as Information Carriers. Here is an example of how these networks could be combined, with shepherds and vagrants exchanging information with each other during their travels. This passage is especially interesting because it contains a conversation between two supposed non-persons. Although shepherds could be fairly certain of meeting one another, conversations with beggars would not have been as reliable. Nonetheless, their interaction could have formed an important part of information trading, the shepherds carrying news from vagrants back to their households and the vagrants taking anything they learned from the shepherds off on their own uncertain course.
appear to be ashamed of his shabby appearance, engaging Thormóð in conversation without hesitation. This is not to say that he is unaware of the impression he makes, evidenced by his belief that his clothing could be the subject of a joke, but that he is unconcerned by it. If anything, his protest against the perceived joke demonstrates Oddi’s self-respect and his expectation of receiving respect from others. As well, mentioning that he is treated well by good people places an assumption on Thormóð’s behaviour based on precedent.\textsuperscript{331} Although the conversation is initiated by Thormóð, Oddi does not act in a subservient manner, engaging fully in the interaction. He introduces himself with the rather disgusting nickname ‘Louse’ Oddi without shame and then proceeds to ask Thormóð his name and occupation as though he were addressing an equal.

Oddi does not take Thormóð’s request to carry a message as an order; he considers what will be required of him before he agrees based on the terms he has been offered. He does not treat his position as a disadvantage and since, having the ability but lacking the motivation to work, it is within his means to alter his situation, it can be assumed that his göngumadur status is maintained of his own volition.

**Conclusion**

The potential for voluntary vagrancy is an indication of the power of the non-person. Those who relied upon vagrants and shepherds as channels of communication made themselves vulnerable in the act of working to maintain their own superior positions. The presence of a non-person forced others to actively modify their own behaviour; it became necessary for the elite to guard their speech and actions in the company of the people who made up the lowest order of society. Thus, in the power game of which information was so important a part, the figure of the Icelandic non-person took on an unexpectedly dominant role. Knowledge in the possession of a vagrant, a shepherd or even a friend, could be used to trap, trick or control those who were unwary and although it was possible to manage one’s public image and attempt to limit or influence outgoing information concerning oneself, it was impossible to prevent it entirely. Every action and response, perhaps even the lack of one, could be revealing, and information gleaned during conversation had the potential to harm or provoke.

Different settings carried with them different hazards but also opportunities. Events which involved a gathering of the social elite, such as assemblies, feasts and sporting events, garner the most attention in the sagas. Powerful men were under scrutiny in these very public situations, both from their peers and from non-persons. If managed correctly, one could use

\textsuperscript{331} Once again, this excerpt can be related to Chapter 2, this time the section on Information as a Commodity to Non-Persons. The spaewife who expects a fair reward for her words is similar to Louse Oddi. Both of these characters set out the terms for participation and establish a minimum requirement for their cooperation.
these gatherings to one’s advantage, winning praise for honourable behaviour, and taking the opportunity to gain information through prudent interaction. However, as the main focus of those assembled, elite men were also at risk of exposing themselves through rash speech or action. The home is another setting for communication, one that is perhaps underrepresented in the Icelandic sources. The conversations considered most worthy by saga authors frequently involve men, a group which spent considerable amounts of time on the move. There are, of course, examples of both men and women conversing within the home but it is likely that considerably more discussion took place there, perhaps more than any other setting. This is the location where confidential information was exchanged between husband and wife, or between householders and their masters. If the household was the most important unit within Icelandic society, it should follow that they worked together, not only to gather information, but also to process and protect it.

In the previous two chapters I have discussed various factors which affect the transmission of information and the distinctions made between different types of people and settings, however, I have not yet examined how the information was defined by these same factors. In the final chapter I will explore the classification of information itself as well as the implications of its appraisal.
Chapter 4. The Classification of Information

Introduction

Although all information is valuable, not all of it is considered equal. How can one label different kinds of communication? Which factors affect how information is perceived and received? The choice of setting and the speakers involved in a conversation dictate societal opinions on the content and quality of the information exchanged. The subtle differences between different types of information sharing are a product of factors such as the gender of those involved in a conversation as well as the content of the exchange, whether the news being discussed is speculation or fact, whether it is personally relevant to the participants and where the discussion takes place. The most important distinction to be considered in the discussion of non-person communication channels is whether the news exchanged is considered to be gossip or not.

In this chapter I will first define gossip, both generally and specifically, as it is treated in Christian thought. This will be followed by a description of the function and definition of gossip in small communities in Newfoundland and Iceland as well as an examination of the properties which create different classes of information, specifically those which separate news from gossip. The next section focuses on the influence which gender has on society’s perception of various forms of exchange, both for powerful housewives and for non-persons. The importance of gender is itself affected by factors such as social standing and occupation and the setting in which information sharing took place. The attitude towards gossip and female information transmission in medieval Iceland indicates a fear of the uncontrolled flow of information, thus I will finish this chapter with an overview of this anxiety as represented in the Grágás laws referring to speech.

Gossip Defined

The most rudimentary definition of gossip describes it as the act of talking about another’s private or personal matters, particularly when the person being discussed is not present. The term can also be employed as a descriptor or title of the person who engages in gossip, ‘a gossip’. Gossip is interpreted as idle, censuring both the gossipers as well as the very act and content of the discussion, as petty and without purpose. By this definition, gossiping could be regarded as antisocial behaviour. It is essentially impossible to separate gossip and malignity. Although the definition of gossip does not require that it be slanderous, neither does it require that the information exchanged be true or accurate. The secrecy of gossip, both in the nature of its content and the setting and manner in which it is conveyed, unavoidably creates a negative impression and social anxiety.
Basic consideration of the concept of gossip does not take into account its various functions. This is most likely because most people are not consciously aware of the way in which their speech acts operate on a larger and more theoretical scale. This is especially true for gossip as it is a form of speech which is generally dismissed as trivial. Gossip may be employed as a form of entertainment but it also works to create and control societal boundaries. Engaging in gossip allows people to express their own opinions and evaluate, and potentially influence, others. This form of interaction creates an opportunity for a society to unofficially generate and maintain communal values, which is particularly interesting as gossiping itself is often considered to be a social transgression.

Gossip is passed on selectively and most often in a private setting and it is therefore an intimate form of exchange normally reserved for interactions between small groups of trusted confidants; it can also be used to create a feeling of intimacy or friendship.

**Gossip Defined by Christianity**

Christian thought certainly had a great effect on the beliefs and opinions of modern Newfoundlanders. Although not all the sagas take place in Christianised society, it was within a Christian context that they were written and recorded. It is therefore important to consider the effect which Christian ideals may have had on the narrative or the mindset of the authors themselves. The Bible teaches that gossiping is wicked and lists it amongst the traits of those who do not ‘see fit to acknowledge god’:

> They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.  

Interestingly, this passage also places blame on those who give their approval, perhaps simply by failing to denounce gossip. Thus those who listen to or benefit from gossip, even if they do not actively participate, are culpable as well. The destructive nature of gossip is also recognized. For instance, the proverbs read: For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases. As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body. Further: “A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.” Gossip is then the cultivator and sustainer of feud, and the gossiper guilty of dishonesty and quarrelsomeness as well as acting with the intention of

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332 The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Romans 1:28-32
333 Ibid, Proverbs 26:20-22
334 Ibid, Proverbs 16:28
creating discord. As seen in the previous passage, the term ‘whisperer’ may also be translated as ‘gossiper’,\(^{335}\) these shades of meaning emphasize the secretive, and perhaps shameful, nature of gossip.

Movement is also addressed in the discussion of gossip, albeit not as the main focus. People who gossip are described as “going about”\(^{336}\) or “going around”\(^{337}\) slandering. Although necessary for the dissemination of information, movement also creates a feeling of aimlessness and lack of occupation which contributes to gossip’s reputation as pointless chatter. This connection between laziness, and thus abnormality and worthlessness, and gossip, is emphasized in a passage from the New Testament: “…they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.”\(^{338}\) This quotation is interesting because it describes the conduct which defines vagrancy and directly relates it to the spread of gossip. It also attributes this antisocial behaviour specifically to widows.

Gossiping is universally condemned by the Christian faith, something which may have had an effect on its portrayal in sagas, and undoubtedly on its reputation in Newfoundland. The nature of gossip creates unavoidably negative connotations and Christianity serves to strengthen them by providing a framework within which it becomes punishable behaviour.

**Gossip and Society in Newfoundland and Iceland**

The main difference between the presentation of gossip in Newfoundland and in the sagas, is its function as a form of social control.\(^{339}\) In Cat Harbour and Codroy Valley, gossip was used to censure residents’ actions and the opinions expressed during conversation helped to create the community values by which others were judged. In the sagas, gossip may be said to reflect social morality but it does not seem to construct it. Certainly, information carriers were aware of behaviour which constituted a breach in accepted social conduct, and were quick to alert others to the digression, however, determining whether saga gossip was a method of social control is more challenging. What can be said for certain is that it acted as an effective method for exchanging information in both Newfoundland and Iceland, and that it served as a way to gauge individual opinions in these communities. In Newfoundland, gossip was the most important form of oral culture. Within dyadic contracts in the Valley it was “one of the

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\(^{335}\) For example, the unrighteous in Romans 1:29 are described as ‘whisperers’ in the King James Bible, but ‘gossips’ in the English Standard Version.

\(^{336}\) The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Proverbs 11:13 and 20:19

\(^{337}\) Ibid, Leviticus 19:16

\(^{338}\) Ibid, Timothy 5:13-14

\(^{339}\) Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 97)
most pervasive forms of exchange...[forming] a system of interlocking channels that [assured] a very rapid and efficient flow of ‘news’. This same ‘system’ is created by the movement of non-persons and the practice of gift giving within the sagas.

Szwed argues that gossip was not only a primary means of gathering information, it was also the basis of a set of communal values and a way in which to understand other people’s beliefs. People were always eager to hear a piece of gossip repeated because they were able to gain new information, the opinion of the conveyer, in the retelling; “all news worth hearing is worth hearing again.” Equally, gossipers benefited from sharing news because it gave them a chance to state their own opinions and to learn those of their listeners.

In Newfoundland, gossiping was participated in as an activity. However, the sagas do not generally give the impression that the conversation, the act of gossiping itself, was something to be relished. This may, in part, be because many of these conversations are held between two people separated by social hierarchy; they are participating in a formal transaction which, although necessary and mutually beneficial, was not enjoyable in and of itself. Gossip in Newfoundland, however, took place between equals and often concerned others of their mutual acquaintance; the act of gossiping was a pastime which entertained as well as informed. Although it is not demonstrated in the sagas, it seems reasonable to assume that Icelanders also participated in gossip with close friends as a form of diversion.

**News and Gossip: The Classification and Reputation of Information**

Within the Valley there was little or no separation between the concepts of ‘gossip’, ‘information’, ‘opinion’ and ‘fact’. What was said was as good as true because it was the information on which judgements and actions were based. However, people still maintained a distinction between information which was news and that which was gossip. The definitions of these terms was somewhat flexible but the category into which information fell did have an effect on its reputation for quality and on the way in which it was transmitted.

News can be defined as noteworthy information about recent events whereas gossip is not limited specifically to ‘events’ and can refer to, for example, the discussion of persons, relationships and emotions from any time point. The limitations of time and conversational

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340 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 90)
341 See Frankenbarg, 1957(20-21) for his theories on gossip creating a sense of community in a small town in rural Wales. Many of his reasons, such as the exclusion of strangers from participating in or being the subject of gossip, can also be applied to Newfoundland. See also, Gluckman, 1963 (312-313) for a discussion on the ‘privilege’ of being allowed to join in community gossip as a signifier of membership. It is interesting to consider whether being involved in gossip gave non-persons a sense of belonging and, if so, whether it was recognized by the rest of society.
342 Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 97)
343 Ibid, (Private Cultures, 80)
material give news a reputation for being factual and dependable but the freedom of gossip can result in inconsistent information, the potential for unreliability increasing as the same topics are discussed repeatedly over a long period of time.

These guidelines help to formulate a general definition of news and gossip but in practice the distinction between these two types of information is much more fluid. Information which enters into public dialogue as news may eventually become gossip, and vice versa. For example, in his study of Newfoundland, Faris found that information which had been previously been considered gossip “...[became] acceptable ‘news’ when introduced in a shop (i.e., the ‘public’) conversation years later if the individuals involved [were] not present or [were] no longer sensitive about the issue.” In this case it is the setting of the exchange rather than the time period which determines which information is news and which is gossip. Here gossip is defined as news which is transmitted privately rather than publicly.

As in Newfoundland, in most saga episodes where news is relayed the listener seems willing to believe what they have heard, or at least consider it sufficient cause to seek out further information in the same vein. This holds true in situations involving the gossip and messages of beggars as well as conversations with servants or between friends.

The sagas refer frequently to ‘rumours’ which spur their characters to action. In many of these instances neither the rumour’s source nor the manner in which it was conveyed are revealed. What is clear is that this was a commonly accepted method of information transmission and that the content of rumours was, not infrequently, considered reasonable grounds for a response. There does not appear to have been a strong distinction between gossip and legitimate news and it seems that rumour was generally considered to be true unless proven otherwise.

The serious value accorded to rumoured information is demonstrated in *Egils Saga*:

And when Egil’s party were ready they started to return...Egil said to the earl: “Now we will bear to the king this tribute which we have received. But know, earl, that this is much less money than the king deems to be his due here...as he thinks, thou oughtest to pay atonement for the messengers whom common rumour says thou didst cause to be slain.” The earl said that that was not true... Now when Egil was gone, the earl called to him his two brothers... and spoke thus: “…Egil...will, I expect, do us an ill turn when he comes to the king. We may by this mark how he will bear our matter before the king, that he threw in our face such a charge, the taking the life of the

344 Faris, 1966 (238)
345 See numerous good examples throughout *Egils Saga* and *Grettis Saga*.
king’s men. Now must ye two go after their party and slay them all, and let none bear this slander before the king...”

Egil takes common rumour as fact and the earl considers the story of his misdeeds believable enough to warrant murder. Both men treat rumour as powerful and rather than attempt to defend himself with speech the Earl decides that preventing the tale from ever reaching the king in the first place is the most effective way to protect himself, thus indicating that once a rumour became part of the public consciousness it was more or less considered to be true or as good as true. This idea is supported by the charge of murdering the previous messengers. It is worth considering that this may have been a common tactic, something which also serves to reiterate the power of the news carrier as well as a recognition that they were generally believed.

Despite the power of rumour and a predisposition for belief, there is also proof within the sagas that people were aware that information could be manipulated and that not all news in circulation was entirely true. Besides the more obvious instances where one character lies directly to another, for instance, the trickery of Mord, there are examples of false news being spread to the general population. One such example is the aforementioned episode from Laxdæla saga in which Aud uses her shepherd to spread a positive rumour about Thord, another is the false verse recited by a beggar man in Kormáks saga. However, in a society which relied so heavily upon information which spread by word-of-mouth, it would have been very difficult to ascertain which news was true and which was false.

Although not often mentioned specifically it is also possible that information could become unreliable because of the uncontrolled and unmonitored way in which it moved through the society. An example of this is seen in Njálal when Flosi questions the trustworthiness of community gossip. Having heard that their enemy Kair is in the north, the Sigfussons feel safe in their plan to ride west with Flosi and see to their farms. However, Flosi is more wary, saying, “I am not sure how much truth there is in these stories of Kari’s movements...reports from much nearer at hand than these often turn out to be garbled...” Flosi’s speech indicates a distrust of rumour but it seems that his misgivings are based on his belief that mistakes can be made when information is transmitted from person to person, not from a feeling that news carriers intentionally wish to deceive. The chances of receiving misinformation increase with

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346 Green, 1893 (CH 77)
347 As mentioned at the beginning of this section, in Newfoundland gossip was generally accepted as truth. However, it has also been noted that members of these communities were not especially credulous and, in fact, that they were taught to be distrustful at a young age. (Szwed, 1966 (Private Cultures, 80)) This may have been a reaction to the importance of oral information sharing and the potential severity of rumours.
348 Press, 1880 (CH 35)
349 Collingwood and Stefánsson (CH 20, p114-115)
350 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 149, p332)
the number of people who were involved in its transmission. His mention of the proximity of
the source supports the suggestion that it was the nature of oral communication and its
potential for misinterpretation or omission over larger distances that caused concern. Distrust
in oral information carried is not often referenced in the sagas but this instance provides
evidence that it was a cause of concern for those who relied upon this type of communication.

Flosi’s mistrust was due to the problems inherent in the oral transmission of news, not to the
classification of the information he received. However, the ‘type’ of communication also
affected the way it was received and the recognition it was accorded by society. Gossip and
rumour were taken less seriously than information which was seen as news.

There is a saga distinction between news and gossip and it is apparent that the first was
considered far superior to the later. For instance, the untrustworthiness of gossip was
expressed in its unsuitability for legal cases. When used as the evidence, gossip does not seem
to have held much weight, although this type of information was apparently considered
dependable enough to support other types of action. In Víga-Glúms saga, Thorain is hesitant
to seek revenge without reliable evidence to support him, saying, “...the fact is I do not like to
set up mere gossip and nonsense on our side to meet this charge.”351 This idea is taken further
in Njáló, when Eyjolf deals the prosecution a heavy blow by excluding one of Mord’s
witnesses “for gossipry, for which sake it is lawful to challenge a neighbour on the inquest;
ye...are for a lawful reason incapable of uttering a finding, for now a lawful challenge has
overtaken you...”352 In this instance gossip is not only insufficient, it is incriminating.

**Gossip and Gender**

Attempting to define news and gossip necessarily involves gender as it is yet another factor
which can determine the classification of information. Women’s information, no matter how
trustworthy, is treated in a different, less positive way than men’s. Although it would seem
that all female information sharing is suspicious, the negative affiliation between women and
idle talk is more likely to be referred to when information appears suspect; the ‘chatter’ of old
women becomes synonymous for news which is pernicious and potentially untrue or
exaggerated. As mentioned in the opening to this section, the negative connotations of gossip
are frequently created by a derogatory association with women. As a result, the ways in which
women communicate are naturally identified as gossip and vice versa.

351 Head, 1866 (CH 22)
352 DaSent, 1861 (CH 47) In Magnusson and Pálsson’s translation the man disqualified for gossipry is charged
with having a ‘spiritual relationship’ with Mord. This phrase is rather unclear but may signify unlawful collusion
between the two men. (Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH142, p304)
Within the sagas, gossip is often disparaged. Frequently it is considered to be at the root of bad advice and is connected to women and their reputation for unlucky counsel. Hávamál warns of the potential dangers of a woman’s words: “The speech of a maiden should no man trust nor the words which a woman says; for their hearts were shaped on a whirling wheel and falsehood fixed in their breasts” and hints at the extent of the damage they can cause: “Wounded to death, have I seen a man by the words of an evil woman; a lying tongue had bereft him of life, and all without reason of right”.

Anxiety created by female information sharing is a theme which runs through Gísla saga. In one example, Gisli makes a grave error when he chants a verse in which he makes a veiled reference to his murder of Thorgrim. He is not deterred from singing by the presence of Thordisa and several other women. Whether this unguarded behaviour is a reflection of a general lack of respect for women and their potential for non-person status is unclear. It is possible that Gisli is simply careless or underestimates the women’s ability to discern his meaning. When asked, Thordisa relates this verse as evidence alongside her own suspicion of Gisli’s guilt to her male relatives. Despite her honesty and apparent intelligence (she is able to memorise and understand Gisli’s verse at once) Thordisa’s information is tainted by her gender:

> Then Bork grew awfully angry, and said: “I will now turn back at once and slay Gisli. The best way is to waste no more time.” But Thorkel says he will not agree to that. “I am not quite sure whether this be true or not. Bear in mind the saw that says ‘Women’s counsel is always unlucky.’ For even though this should be as bad as she has said, surely, Bork, it is better to follow the law of the land in this matter and make the man an outlaw; for thou hast the cause so made to thy hand that Gisli must be found guilty, even though he had some excuse. So that we shall be able to manage this suit as we choose if we take the right steps, and that is far better than spoiling everything by rushing on so madly against all reason.” The end was, that he had his way.

Thorkel is unable to entirely trust Thordisa, but it seems that his reaction is most strongly influenced by the belief that ‘women’s counsel is always unlucky’ rather than a judgement of her individually. His response presents women information carriers as a force in opposition to law and reason. Although Thordisa is simply sharing her opinions in the same manner as a man would, her words, rather than Gisli’s deeds, are blamed for inciting Bork to act rashly.
Men are more likely to actively criticize women for their speech; however, both sexes are aware of the dangers of gossip. Asgerda tells Auda about her extramarital love while the two sit together in private. Despite their seclusion, Auda is loath to gossip and twice warns Auda against it, asking her to “…stop [her] idle talk…” \(^{358}\) cautioning her: “Oft comes ill from women’s gossip, and it may be so, and much worse, from this thing. Let us take counsel against it.”\(^ {359}\) Unfortunately, Auda is not cautious enough and her words are overheard by her husband.

A woman herself, Auda believes just as strongly as Thorkel in the bad luck of women’s gossip. Their warnings emphasise the connection between female gender, gossip and ruinous consequences.

Apart from the issue of their gender, the setting in which women exchange information can contribute to a feeling of social unease. Faris notes that: “[Newfoundland’s] men, of course, 'gossip', but in the normal course of events they are not in situations where they can transmit or purvey the type of information labelled 'gossip' by the community.”\(^ {360}\) By this he means that men are more often out in public where it is considered inappropriate and incautious. Although he does not elaborate further, his comment leads one to question whether the saga women are accused of ‘gossiping’ simply because they are so often situated in the home, making any information they discuss secret by nature and suspect as a result. For women, words are a form of action\(^ {361}\), which may result in an anxiety created by gossip as an expression of their agency. This form of action is more secretive and difficult to monitor and control than the actions of men which take place in public. In a culture which represented women as untrustworthy, the necessarily private nature of their interactions would have caused concern.

**Information Exchange: Gender, Prejudice and Non-Persons**

Despite the indistinctiveness of the non-person, it seems that gender still played a role in the reception of their information and the way it was labelled by their communities.

*Njála* is rife with female vagrants and they figure briefly within *Reyðæla Saga* and *Víga-Skútu* as well. However, within the saga genre as a whole, male vagrants are employed far more often. The noticeable differences between the genders may, in part, be due to the larger number of examples featuring beggar men which allows for a greater variety in their depiction.

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\(^{358}\) DaSent, 1866 (CH 6)

\(^{359}\) Ibid, (CH 6)

\(^{360}\) Faris, 1966 (238)

\(^{361}\) See Clover, 1986 (145) for a discussion of women’s (and old men’s) words as deeds in the feud situation and Straubhaar, 2011 for information on the potential power of female skalds. See also, Borocsky, 1999 for her take on women and the power of their oral performance.
However, although it is difficult to make a comparison based on gender when female examples are rather limited, evidence from *Njála*, which deals with information carried by both genders, can be elaborated upon with reference to other sagas.

Naturally there are a great many similarities in the literary treatment of vagrants of both sexes. They often deliver secret, and usually incitive, information. Both are treated as fairly neutral entities and are able to interact freely with many types of people. The main difference between the genders is that male vagrants often act under orders, having been given a specific task, for instance, to relay a message, whereas the women in *Njála* wander and deliver information of their own volition; they decide where to go and what their news will be.

The depiction of the beggar, most particularly that of the gossiping *gongukona* is distinctly negative, yet the saga attitude towards shepherds is decidedly positive. Are the shepherds portrayed as eager and intelligent because they are men? Or is it because of their position within a household as a contributing member of the hierarchical system?

Unlike conversing with vagrants, interaction with shepherds would not have been frightening. Shepherds were active members of society and could be expected to act in a socially acceptable manner; they were not unpredictable and had more to lose. The talk of shepherds is not ‘gossip’ because it has a purpose beyond personal gain and is most often used to assist their household. Shepherds’ speech is not idle. Because they do not act as messengers, except for the benefit of their household, and because they do not require compensation, shepherds’ information may be more dependable. Despite the occasionally negative consequences of shepherds’ reports, for example, feuding and murder, their practice of spreading information was not disparaged. Perhaps this is because it was done in service of another and not of themselves. It may also be that because shepherds were most often outside in the ‘public’ sphere, where information exchange was less likely to be considered ‘gossip’, they were treated with less suspicion than beggars who went from house to house and shared information behind closed doors. Despite their many similarities, there is a subtle but marked difference in the way shepherds and vagrants were portrayed and perceived.

Over at Hlidarend, Gunnar was out of doors when he saw his shepherd galloping towards the house, right into the home meadow. “Why are you riding so hard?” asked Gunnar. “I wanted to be loyal to you,” he replied. “I saw a group of eight men go riding down along the Markar River. Four of them were wearing brightly-coloured clothing.” “That must be Oktel,” said Gunnar. The shepherd said, “I have often heard
their insults. Skamkel was saying, over at Dale, that you wept when they rode you down. I tell you this because I hate such spiteful talk."

The shepherd is very forthcoming with his information, which is indispensable to the head of his household. Whereas the beggar women in this saga have no qualms about repeating insults to spark interest, the shepherd does so only because of his hatred for them. Shepherds in the sagas are associated with loyalty and honesty. Information would not have held the same commodity value for children or shepherds as it would have for vagrants and it is likely that they would have been considered a more reliable source. Interestingly, the sagas contain no evidence of beggars personally fabricating any of their information, although they do deliver false messages for others and occasionally add their own commentary during the transmission of news.363

An examination of both prominent women and non-persons as transmitters and receivers of information demonstrates that setting, gender and occupation all contribute to the classification of their speech. It also shows that different types of information were given different, often somewhat irrational or emotional, responses. These reactions were often motivated by concern for the consequences of information sharing which was outside of the control of the acceptable male-dominated social hierarchy. The same misgivings about unmonitored communication are found within the laws.

**Legality of Speech**

The classification of information is also represented in the *Grágás* laws which make it clear that there was a social perception that some types of information transmission, certain subjects being discussed by certain groups, were unacceptable. As in the previous discussion of the *Grágás* treatment of the poor, I do not suppose that these laws governing the politics of speech were strictly followed; it would have been even more difficult to control travelling information than travelling vagrants. However, they do represent how different types of information sharing were regarded by their society. The laws themselves are extremely restrictive and appear to attempt to prevent the discussion of other people entirely. For instance, compensation can be rewarded even for words which “can be taken in both a good and a bad sense”.364 Similarly, “if a man reproaches someone with taunts or asserts some disfigurement in him, even if he speaks the truth, then the penalty is lesser outlawry”.365 This law could perhaps be connected to the commonly repeated observation that Njal is beardless. Although technically this statement is true it is nonetheless considered offensive and

362 Magnusson, Pálsson, 1975 (CH 54, p133)
363 For example, Magnusson and Pálsson, 1975 (CH 92, p201)
364 Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (181)
365 Ibid, (196)
intolerable. The conversation surrounding Njal’s beardlessness originates in the composition of a hurtful verse and the power of this poem to spread and endure in the public consciousness helps to provide an explanation for the extent of the Grágás laws concerning the legal implications of creating and repeating verses.\footnote{Dennis, Foote, Perkins, 2000 (197-198)}

No man had the right to recite poetry about another, even if it was for the purpose of praise. If a man composed so much as a stanza about someone else, even if there was no mockery within its lines, then they could be fined three marks; if he composed anything more than a stanza then the penalty was full outlawry. If this man were to take it one step further and teach the verse to someone, keeping in mind that it was not intended to mock the subject, then they could be fully outlawed. The strictness of these laws could be interpreted as an attempt to prevent conflict resulting from the misinterpretation of information, something which became increasingly likely as it travelled by word of mouth, as well as a pre-emptive action against verses which include praise put together in such a way that it becomes mockery. The subject of intentionally defamatory verses is taken even more seriously and almost every eventuality is considered. There are provisions made for verses composed by groups of men, for the recitation or teaching of verses, for composing love-verses for women or poems about kings and for anyone who spread poetry abroad. All of these offences, and many more, were to result in full outlawry. One particularly interesting classification is that of “wide-ranging poetry”, verses which could not be said to be composed about a particular person but which went “the rounds of the district” for which full outlawry was also prescribed.\footnote{Ibid, (198)} This law indicates a recognition of the way in which poetry travelled as well as a fear of it.

There is little saga evidence that the laws pertaining to poetry were frequently enforced. One reason for this may be that the cases resulting in full outlawry were summoning offences which were heard before the assembly. Therefore they required that the offending poem be repeated in front of everyone gathered there. If a poem was not particularly well-known beforehand it certainly would have been after a recitation at a public meeting! Many men may have decided it would do their reputation less damage to leave the matter alone.

The matter of summoning is also of importance if one considers the difficulty which would have arisen had someone wished to charge a vagrant with either the arrangement or dissemination of a verse. Having no legal residence it would not have been possible for wanderers to be summoned to court in the traditional manner and prosecuting them for any of their speech acts may have been practically impossible, let alone the fact that they would not have been able to pay any sort of compensation.
Although it does not seem realistic to assume that these laws were followed accurately they do reinforce the idea presented in the laws regarding general conversation, that the discussion of other people should be restricted. The prevailing feeling in the laws surrounding speech is one of anxiety stemming from uncontrolled oral communication and the possibility of social strife as a result. As mentioned in the section concerning assemblies, in order for small communities to preserve order it was necessary to avoid conflict whenever possible. These laws attempting to control provocative speech demonstrate an effort to do just that. They can be related to the previous discussion involving the inescapability of oral information and the idea that rumour is essentially no less important than fact. As well, they are strongly influenced by the Icelandic ideals of honour, reputation and family.

Conclusion
The sharing of information was not always a simple or clear-cut exchange. Reactions based on factors such as gender, setting, social position and occupation resulted in a hierarchy of information where some types were regarded as more trustworthy and valuable than others. In both Iceland and Newfoundland, gossip was degraded as a lesser form of communication.

The deep-seated culture of mistrust of gossip is demonstrated in excerpts from both Hávamál and the Bible. Although it is never explicitly stated, much of this unease stems from the inability of powerful men to monitor or control the speech of women and non-persons, creating social anxiety surrounding the private exchange of information and resulting in the categorisation of gossip as anti-social behaviour. Gossip often deals with personal or sensitive subjects, creating opportunities for slander or insult, and thus, conflict. As mentioned in previous chapters, this is something which small communities are prone to and which they strive to avoid. In an honour-based society, such as in Iceland, words had a particularly strong influence on public opinions and inspired reactions with serious repercussions.

Within the family sagas, gossip’s connection with women contributes to their reputation for bad advice and harmful speech but it is also important to remember that this female communication would have benefited their entire household. As much as gossip may be disparaged, and saga women offered up as scapegoats, gossip which became known to a household’s women would have been a valuable source of information for its male members as well, the very people who were most likely to disparage it. Gossip and rumour often deal

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368 For comparison with Newfoundland, see Chiaramonte, 1970 for his observations on the restrictive speech in Deep Harbour and tendency of the residents to stick to neutral subjects, particularly when conversing with someone who was not a member of their own household. (12)
with public opinion and knowing what people were saying about one another. This gave the people who were privy to this information the opportunity of predicting how those who were the subject of such gossip would react. For instance, if a man were being ridiculed for his failure to avenge a relative, it would seem likely that he would soon take some action to repair his damaged reputation. An awareness of these rumours could give his potential victims, their friends and kismen the chance to prepare themselves for an attack.

This hypothetical scenario also demonstrates how gossip acted as an unofficial method for the creation and expression of communal morals and ideals. Its power to both reflect and control society should not be underestimated. Certainly, recognition and fear of the potential power of all types of communication is demonstrated in the Icelandic Grágás laws which appear to demonstrate a desire to forbid all discussion, poems or even passing remarks said by one person about another. Although not all modes of communication were equally respectable or credible, every type of speech had the potential to be both influential and dangerous.
Conclusion

The sagas present an image of life in Iceland but further investigation is required to create depth and meaning. The superficial, often formulaic, image of non-personage found within the *Islendingasögur* has caused them to be passed over by readers and researchers. However, the saga non-person is merely a simulacrum of the true historical figure and it is not possible to believe that an entire class of society could be represented in its entirety by a handful of saga episodes. Shepherds and vagrants represent non-persons in the family sagas and are generally portrayed as minor stock characters; they are not individuals and, at first glance, serve no other purpose than assisting the upper classes, and even the sagas authors themselves, in advancement of their feuds. That is why it has been especially interesting to discover the hidden power and importance of a group which has too long been undervalued and ignored. As information carriers, non-persons took on a crucial role within their communities, one which often had the unexpected consequence of giving them control over even the most prominent members of the social elite. The study of Iceland’s non-persons has led me to consider issues such as gender, mobility, friendship, vulnerability and the commodification and classification of information in relation to the subject of the power game played by wealthy farmers and chieftains.

Although their relationship has not yet been acknowledged, I believe that communication and the power game were inextricably linked and that it was this connection which allowed non-persons to influence the social elite. The movement of non-persons formed channels of communication and powerful men and women had to work together with the members of their households to foster relationships with these lowly wanderers in order to gain access to information which they could then use to build and maintain friendships, inform their counsel, foster good reputations and affect the actions of others. Unfortunately, the trade value of information meant that it was also sought after by non-persons; thus forcing the elite to modify their speech and behaviour in an attempt to control their public image and protect themselves from revealing a secret or perhaps becoming the subject of unflattering gossip. Information gleaned by a non-person, or even a friend or kinsmen, during conversation could be used to trick, trap or control someone unwise enough to disclose it. A constant need for information, coupled with the vulnerability inherent in its exchange, placed the social elite in a weak position when interacting with their inferiors.

This vulnerability could be influenced by a variety of factors, including the setting of the conversation and social positions and genders of those involved. Official gatherings such as feasts and assemblies provided the ruling class with opportunities to converse with one
another, however it was the unofficial lines of communication which were the most important. Gossip and rumour dictated people’s actions in Iceland’s honour-based society and this type of information was transmitted between households and communes by non-persons. Both public and private conversations carried their own risks and opportunities and different levels of mobility meant that some settings were more accessible than others. Preferences in, or necessities of, location could also affect the way information was shared and the value it was accorded. For instance, the public nature of the assembly offered powerful men a chance to demonstrate their wisdom, leadership and legal prowess, as well as to strengthen relationships by assisting their friends. However, the same visibility which created these opportunities was what exposed prominent figures to possible embarrassment or loss of reputation should they fail to impress the other attendees. It could be assumed that any actions, conversations or agreements which took place at an assembly would become common knowledge throughout the land as those who had gathered dispersed, carrying information with them. Unlike their mobile husbands, the restricted movements of housewives meant that most frequently received information in their own homes. They were able to offer hospitality to passing wanderers in exchange for news, but the private setting not only made them vulnerable, it degraded the information they traded and reduced it to the status of gossip. However, in spite of the anxiety which surrounded informal information distribution, it remained a central part of Iceland’s power game and an indispensable tool of the social elite.

The main purpose of my work has been to shed some light upon the previously under-studied subject of non-persons within Icelandic society, their role as information carriers and the various implications of this position for both the non-persons themselves and their communities. The dearth of previous research and the formulaic presentation of the non-person within the sagas themselves were obstacles which I overcame by engaging with historical source material in both the family sagas and Grágás, as well as employing an anthropological model provided by studies made in modern Newfoundland. This is not to say that my study was without limitation, the Icelandic sources are naturally difficult to deal with and there is, of course, debate surrounding the veracity of their contents. However, I believe that by using a combination of these three approaches I have been able to create a more complete picture of the role of communication in Iceland’s power game and the part played by non-persons.

I hope that the direction I have taken with my thesis could lead to further investigation of the themes of non-personage, gender, communication and the value of information in Iceland, particularly in relation to the power game. Also, that it may create a precedent for using anthropological studies and other such examinations of human behaviour in the context of the
sagas. I have concentrated on non-persons as communication channels but there are many other aspects of their position in society which could be studied further. For example, literature regarding prominent women in Old Norse literature, and even their speech acts specifically, has been of great help to me in writing this thesis. However, the focus of such work has always been the social elite. Just as the male heroes of the sagas dominate the discussion of the genre as a whole, prosperous housewives and widows have commanded the attention of scholars studying Icelandic women. It could be illuminating to examine the place of the female non-person further in order to create a more thorough understanding of the experiences of Icelandic women. Furthermore, the subject of communication could be applied to research concerning Iceland’s own past as well as its historical interaction with other nations and peoples. Most importantly, I believe that the topics of communication and information as commodity would be a valuable addition to the current discussion surrounding the power game of Iceland’s social elite, something which it has hitherto been lacking.
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