

Tactics of Evasion: The survival strategies of vagrants and day labourers in eighteenth and nineteenth century rural Iceland

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Abstract: Legal restrictions on vagrancy and day labour in Iceland became increasingly strict in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, culminating with a decree in 1783 which prohibited any form of masterless labour and proscribed compulsory service on a yearly basis for most people over the age of eighteen. Despite strict regulations and the strenuous efforts of various state officials to uproot the problem, vagrancy and day labour remained relatively common and publicly acknowledged throughout the nineteenth century, thus highlighting the contrast between normative prescription (such as law) and everyday life and the ambiguity of power relations in rural Iceland, underscoring their contested nature. This article discusses how vagrants and illegal day labourers in Iceland in the early nineteenth century found ways to evade the authorities and make a living for themselves on the margins of society. It stresses the agency of the working poor and highlights some of the survival strategies employed, including passport fraud, the careful exploitation of cultural notions of hospitality and methods of earning social capital by providing useful services. The article builds on the case of a travelling healer and vagrant named Árni Sveinsson who was found guilty of vagrancy, forgery and quackery in 1821. His trial provides rare insights into the tactics employed by those on the margins of the law to get around undetected.

Keywords: Árni Sveinsson; vagrancy; compulsory service; labour coercion; mobility; social capital; passports; the labouring poor; microhistory; survival strategies.

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Introduction¹

In December 1820, a forty-nine year old travelling healer named Árni Sveinsson (1771–1839), nicknamed ‘doctor Árni’, was apprehended and brought before the local magistrate in the county of Húnavatnssýsla in northern Iceland to be tried for vagrancy, forgery and practicing medicine without a permit (or any medical education).² He had been practicing his trade in the area for several years, travelling between farms healing local peasants and their families with a variety of methods including enemas, cold baths and putting hooks made of lead in the back of peoples’ knees and necks, a medical practice called *setaceum* which was common in early modern times and until the late nineteenth century.³ His practices had raised the ire of local officials, in particular the appointed doctor in the district who was by law the only man in northern Iceland licensed to practice medicine and was thus ultimately responsible for all local health care.⁴ He had filed official complaints against Árni in 1819 and demanded that the local authorities would put a stop to Árni’s illegal practices.⁵ This proved difficult, however, since the local authorities had no knowledge of Árni’s whereabouts and may have had little inclination to hunt him down, for reasons which will be discussed later on. A year later however, in the autumn of 1820, a new magistrate took office in Húnavatnssýsla who took a hardline stance against vagrancy and illegal day labour.⁶ He managed to have Árni Sveinsson apprehended and brought to trial, where he was eventually

¹ A previous version of this paper was presented in the session ‘Nomadic livelihoods: Norms and practices of labour, peddling, and mobility in pre-industrial Nordic societies’ at the European Social Science History Conference, Belfast April 4–7 2018. I would like to thank all the participants in that session as well as the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

² The case of Árni Sveinsson is discussed in detail, with full references, in Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk: Vistarband og íslenskt samfélag á 19. öld* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2017), pp. 228–32.

³ The method involved creating an artificial ulcer under the skin which was kept irritated for a longer period of time and was intended to release pus from infected areas and to balance the humours. See: Robert Hooper, *A New Medical Dictionary* (Philadelphia: M. Carey and sons, 1817), p. 742. Little is known about the use of this method in Iceland, although it is said to have been common in the eighteenth century. See Jón Steffensen, ‘Alþýðulæknin-gar’, *Íslensk þjóðmenning* VII: *Alþýðuvísindi*, ed. by Frosti F. Jóhannsson (Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1990), pp. 178–82.

⁴ Jón Ólafur Ísberg, *Líf og lækningar: Íslensk heilbrigðissaga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2005), p. 88.

⁵ Following Icelandic tradition, where people are referred to by their given name (first name) and not their patronym (as family surnames were – and are – not commonly in use in Iceland, and then only by elite families), I refer to Árni Sveinsson by his given name throughout the article.

⁶ Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, p. 187.

found guilty of a handful of laws which, when combined, formed the system of compulsory service which was the primary form of labour relations in Iceland in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Although the case itself dates from the early nineteenth century, the trial of Árni Sveinsson shows the long lasting impact of early modern ideas on household discipline and social order established through the strict regulation of labour practices.⁷ In Iceland these ideas were implemented through legislation dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which introduced strict measures to regulate the labouring poor by putting limits on occupational choices and geographical mobility. These regulations bound (nearly all) labourers to households as servants and enforced carefully defined moral standards of conduct through a systematic surveillance of individual behaviour within households by parish priests, as well as the movement of people within parishes.⁸ This legislation remained more or less unchanged until the 1860s when legal reform, combined with demographic pressure and social and economic development, initiated a gradual shift towards modern ‘free wage labour’.⁹

⁷ On the connection between household discipline and the regulation of labour see Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 190–200; 440–51. [Crossref](#); Nina Javette Kofoed, ‘Authorities who care: The Lutheran doctrine of the three estates in Danish legal development from the Reformation to absolutism’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 44 (2019), 430–53 (pp. 440–44). [Crossref](#)

⁸ Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfsstætt fólk*, pp. 52–77. These regulations and their socio-cultural influence are discussed in detail in Loftur Gutormsson, *Childhood, Youth and Upbringing in the Age of Absolutism: An Exercise in Socio-Demographic Analysis* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2017). This is an English translation of a pioneering work in Icelandic social history originally published in Icelandic in 1983. For a more recent overview in English see Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, *Wool and Society: Manufacturing Policy, Economic Thought and Local Production in 18th-Century Iceland* (Göteborg: Makadam, 2008).

⁹ Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, ‘Siðspillandi lögbrot. Páll Briem og leysing vistarbands’, in *Hugmyndageimur Páls Briem*, ed. by Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir and Sverrir Jakobsson (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2020), pp. 165–93. For a more general overview of the social and economic transformation of Iceland in the latter half of the nineteenth century see Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, ‘Family and Household in Iceland 1801–1930: Studies in the Relationship Between Demographic and Socio-Economic Development, Social Legislation and Family and Household Structures’ (doctoral thesis, Uppsala Universitet, 1988); Magnús S. Magnússon, *Iceland in Transition: Labour and Socio-Economic Change Before 1940* (Lund: Ekonomisk-historiska föreningen i Lund, 1985) and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Wasteland with Words: A Social History of Iceland* (London: Reaktion, 2010). The problematic concept of ‘free wage labour’ and its presumed association with ‘modernity’ has been the subject of much debate and criticism by labour historians in recent years. I use the concept here (in parentheses) simply to differentiate between the two labour regimes of compulsory service in the pre-industrial era and the wage-labour system which has been dominant since the

On the other hand the case also discloses to observant readers valuable insights into how vagrants, day labourers and others who operated illegally on the margins of the compulsory service system found ways to subsist within the interstices of Icelandic society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to evade the authorities and earn a living through networking skills and various survival tactics in spite of the law. It highlights not only the agency of the labouring poor but also their ambiguous social status, which depended as much on their contribution to local society and relationship with it (or lack thereof) as their legality or their portrayal in public discourse.¹⁰ As some historians have recently begun to emphasise, labour relations of varying degrees of coercion and individual social status within local communities, however precarious and temporary, were often based on pragmatism and flexibility despite the rigidity of labour and social legislation, creating a gap between law and practice which undermines the normativity of law codes as guides to social relations in the past. This gap can be methodologically exploited by shifting the analytical focus from social construction to social practices.¹¹ Several Nordic historians of labour, mobility and social marginality have fruitfully applied this approach in recent years.¹² This article adds to that growing body of literature.

early twentieth century. For further discussion, see Christian G. De Vito, Juliane Schiel and Matthias van Rossum, 'From bondage to precariousness? New perspectives on labor and social history', *Journal of Social History*, shz057 (2019), pp. 1–19. [Crossref](#)

¹⁰ German historian Otto Ulbricht has argued for viewing vagrant beggars in eighteenth century Germany in the same way. See: Otto Ulbricht, 'The world of a beggar around 1775: Johann Gottfried Kästner', *Central European History*, 27 (1994), 153–184 (pp. 171–73). [Crossref](#)

¹¹ Maria Ågren, 'Introduction', in *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society*, ed. by Maria Ågren (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1–23 (p. 5). [Crossref](#); Jeannette Kamp and Matthias van Rossum, 'Introduction: Leaving work across the world', in *Desertion in the Early Modern World. A Comparative History*, ed. by Matthias van Rossum and Jeannette Kamp (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 3–14 (p. 11). [Crossref](#); Alice Rio, "'Half-free" categories in the early middle ages: Fine status distinctions before professional lawyers', in *Legalism: Rules and Categories*, ed. by Paul Dresch and Judith Scheele (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 129–52. [Crossref](#); Christian G. De Vito, 'Labour flexibility and labour precariousness as conceptual tools for the historical study of the interactions among labour relations', in *On the Road to Global Labour History: A Festschrift for Marcel van der Linden*, ed. by Karl Heinz Roth (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 219–40. [Crossref](#)

¹² See for example Johan Heinsen, 'Straffefanger på fri fod i 1700-tallets Sjælland', *Siden Saxo*, 34 (2017), pp. 2–11; *Making a Living*, ed. by Ågren. [Crossref](#); Hanne Østhus, 'Servants in rural Norway c. 1650–1800', in *Servants in Rural Europe 1400–1900*, ed. by Jane Whittle (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017), pp. 113–30; Johanna Wassholm and Anna Sundelin, 'Emotions, trading practices and communication in transnational itinerant trade: Encounters between "rucksack Russians" and their customers in the late nineteenth- and early

Borrowing from the analytical approach of microhistory,¹³ this article analyses these discrepancies between labour law and labour practice in rural Iceland through the lens of the case of Árne Sveinsson as it appears in court proceedings, using supplementary evidence from similar cases to bolster the analysis. While there are many cases of vagrancy and illegal casual labour to be found in Icelandic court archives, the case of Árne Sveinsson (which I came across while doing research for my doctoral dissertation) is unusual in terms of the details provided and the number of people interrogated during the proceedings. It thus provides an opportunity to go beneath the surface to reveal the ambiguities of social norms when analysed through everyday practices.¹⁴ Although the evidence which can be gleaned from court cases is fragmentary at best, information provided *en passant* or mentioned coincidentally, the case of Árne Sveinsson does provide glimpses into the ‘tactics’ employed by vagrants and day labourers while moving ‘within enemy territory’, to borrow Michel de Certeau’s metaphor.¹⁵ His concept of ‘tactics’ refers to the ways in which subaltern individuals manoeuvre themselves within and around dominant power relationships in order to seize opportunities to escape, evade, avoid, refute or subvert control mechanisms, such as labour and mobility legislation, whenever available, while being fully aware of the contingent nature of such ‘victories’. Or as de Certeau puts it, it is a form of making ‘use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers’.¹⁶

The accumulation of these fragmentary glimpses of tactics (which could also be termed, as Swedish historian Maria Ågren does, a ‘repertoire of practices’)¹⁷ can in turn be seen as part of the more general ‘survival strategies’ of the labouring poor in eighteenth and nineteenth century Iceland and in the Nordic region more generally.¹⁸ While the concept of ‘survival strategies’ is commonly used in historical

twentieth-century Finland’, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 66 (2018), pp. 132–52. [Crossref](#); Carolina Uppenberg, *I husbondens bröd och arbete: Kön, makt och kontrakt i det svenska tjänstefolkssystemet 1730–1860* (Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet, 2018).

¹³ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013). [Crossref](#)

¹⁴ Magnússon and Szijártó, p. 19.

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 37–8.

¹⁶ de Certeau, p. 37. A group of historians studying vagrant removal in London in the eighteenth century have also made use of de Certeau’s concept of ‘tactics’ in order to analyse the ways in which vagrants manipulated the law and its application by officials to their own advantage. See: Tim Hitchcock, Adam Crymble, and Louise Falcini, ‘Loose, idle and disorderly: Vagrant removal in late eighteenth-century Middlesex’, *Social History*, 39 (2014), pp. 509–27. [Crossref](#)

¹⁷ Ågren, p. 18.

¹⁸ Swedish historian Jonas Lindström defines the labouring poor as ‘people who neither had enough land nor were paupers, but depended on wage work for their survival’. See: Jonas

research on the daily life of the poor; it tends to be mostly used in economic terms when analysing the strategies employed by individuals or by families, households or other small social units in securing physical survival on a day to day basis.¹⁹ Many historians, for example, have interpreted vagrancy and part-time casual labour (day labour) as an essential part of the survival strategies (or ‘economy of makeshifts’) of the labouring poor.²⁰ Studies on survival strategies have thus shed light on what ‘people on the margin of subsistence actually did to survive’, as Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm put it.²¹ Less attention has been paid to *how* they manoeuvred within and around the systems of control and surveillance which dictated the options available to them, the actual ‘tactics’ employed, and the social and cultural ambiguities that those practices reveal. That, however, is the subject of this article. It will discuss and analyse the variety of tactics employed by Árni Sveinsson and others among the Icelandic labouring poor, operating on the margins of legality in the early nineteenth century, in order to evade the authorities, to escape detection, or to gain the tacit consent of their illicit activities by local society and generally to survive on a day to day basis. In order to do so, the mechanisms of labour and mobility control and management must however first be delineated.

Lindström, ‘Labouring poor in early modern Sweden? Crofters and lodgers in Västmanland in the 17th century’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 44 (2019), 403–29 (p. 404). [Crossref](#)

- ¹⁹ Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm, ‘Household strategies for survival: An introduction’, *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), pp. 1–17. [Crossref](#); Marian H. A. C. Weevers, Margo de Koster and Catrien C. J. H. Bijleveld, ‘Swept up from the streets or nowhere else to go? The journeys of Dutch female beggars and vagrants to the Oegstgeest state labor institution in the late nineteenth century’, *Journal of Social History*, 46 (2012), pp. 416–29. [Crossref](#); Ariadne Schmidt, ‘Survival strategies of widows and their families in early modern Holland, c. 1580–1750’, *History of the Family*, 12 (2007), pp. 268–81. [Crossref](#); Bruce Scates, ‘The case of Clarinna Stringer: Strategic options and the household economy in late nineteenth-century Australia’, in *Rebellious Families: Household Strategies and Collective Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. by Jan Kok (New York: Berghahn, 2002), pp. 59–78. [Crossref](#)
- ²⁰ Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth Century France 1750–1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Heather Shore, ‘Crime, criminal networks and the survival strategies of the poor in early eighteenth-century London’, in *The Poor in England 1700–1850: An Economy of Makeshifts*, ed. by Steven King and Alannah Tomkins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 137–65. [Crossref](#); Anne Winter, ‘“Vagrancy” as an adaptive strategy: The duchy of Brabant, 1767–1776’, *International Review of Social History*, 49 (2004), pp. 249–77. [Crossref](#)
- ²¹ Fontaine and Schlumbohm, p. 2.

Compulsory service, vagrancy and casual labour

As noted by Jane Whittle in her introduction to the recent volume, *Servants in Rural Europe 1400–1900*, compulsory service was the preferred form of labour relations in the Nordic countries in the early modern period where it was ‘technically illegal for young unmarried people to work casually for wages or be unemployed’.²² Iceland, subject to the Danish crown, followed this pattern with legislation closely mirroring the servant laws in Norway and Denmark which were, according to historian Hanne Østhus, ‘similar, at times even identical’.²³ As in the other Nordic countries (and Europe in general), servant laws in Iceland were entwined with regulations, some regional but others national in scope, on various other social issues, such as casual labour, settlement, poor relief, vagrancy and mobility.²⁴ In Iceland, legal restrictions on casual labour date back to the fourteenth century, when a threshold requiring property ownership was introduced. The law dictated that anyone who did not meet that requirement and did not have another legal profession should hire himself as a servant and thus in effect equalled a system of compulsory service.²⁵

While Icelandic vagrancy laws from the thirteenth century onwards were quite lenient towards the deserving poor, any able-bodied person found in violation of the laws on casual labour was subject to fines and corporal punishment.²⁶ Research is lacking however on the extent to which vagrancy laws were upheld in practice. Studies have either focused on exceptional circumstances such as periods of famine,²⁷ microhistorical analyses of vagrant life-stories²⁸ or ethnological analyses of

²² Jane Whittle, ‘Introduction: Servants in the economy and society of rural Europe’, in *Servants in Rural Europe*, ed. by Whittle, pp. 1–18 (p. 12).

²³ Hanne Østhus, ‘Contested Authority: Master and servant in Copenhagen and Christiania 1750–1850’ (doctoral thesis, European University Institute, 2013), p. 88; Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, p. 56.

²⁴ Theresa Johnsson, ‘Vårt fredliga samhälle: “Lösdriveri” och försvarslöshet i Sverige under 1830-talet’ (doctoral thesis, Uppsala Universitet, 2016); Østhus, ‘Contested Authority’, pp. 88–89; Joanne Innes, Steven King and Anne Winter, ‘Introduction: Settlement and belonging in Europe, 1500–1930s: Structures, negotiations and experiences’, in *Migration, Settlement and Belonging in Europe, 1500–1930s: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Steven King and Anne Winter (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013), pp. 1–28 (p. 12). For the entwined legislation in Iceland, see Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*, pp. 92–97.

²⁵ Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 167–70. See also: Gísli Gunnarsson, *Monopoly Trade and Economic Stagnation: Studies in the Foreign Trade of Iceland, 1602–1787* (Lund: Ekonomisk-historiska föreningen i Lund, 1983), p. 21.

²⁶ Jón Jónsson, *Á mörkum mennskunnar: Viðhorf til fúrufólks í sögnum og samfélagi* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2018).

²⁷ Sigríður Hjördís Jörundsdóttir, ‘Neyðarástand. Sýslumenn og sakamenn á harðindatímum 1755–1759’ (master’s thesis, University of Iceland, 2004).

²⁸ Yngvi Leifsson, *Með álfum: Ævisaga flökkukonunnar Ingiríðar Eiríksdóttur frá Haga í Þingeyjarsýslu 1777–1857* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2015); Yngvi Leifsson, ‘Flökkufólk. Líf og fer-

the status of vagrants in Icelandic culture.²⁹ While these studies provide important insights into the history of vagrancy in Iceland, a broader analysis of the application of vagrancy legislation for extended periods is still missing.

Regulations on compulsory service became more elaborate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, conforming to a similar pattern as in the other Nordic countries and corresponding to increasing intolerance towards the masterless working poor in Europe in this period.³⁰ A police ordinance from 1685 included detailed regulations on servant labour and proscribed harsh punishment for vagrancy and illegal casual labour, culminating in lifelong imprisonment in the stockyards in Copenhagen on the third offence.³¹ Revised but still very similar regulations were included in a decree on domestic discipline introduced in Iceland in 1746. Although meant to strengthen the educational value of service, the decree in a sense infantilized servants, as they were to be seen as part of the family household with a similar status to children and subject to the same form of discipline, including physical punishment for any act of insubordination.³²

In February 1783 a decree was enacted where any exceptions from compulsory service, for anyone over 18 years of age who did not head their own household, became prohibited without a written permission from the authorities. Those who did not comply were to be sentenced to serve in the workhouse, established in Reykjavík in 1762 in order to put able-bodied vagrants to work. Anyone who would assist them in evading the authorities was to be subjected to large fines and be placed in the stocks for an hour.³³ This harsh punishment proved difficult to enforce, particularly in the final decades of the eighteenth century, as a vol-

ðir flökkufólks á Norðurlandi 1783–1816’ (master’s thesis, University of Iceland, 2011); Sigríður Hjördis Jörundsdóttir and Halldóra Kristinsdóttir, *Utangarðs? Ferðalag til fortíðar* (Reykjavík: Uglu, 2015).

²⁹ Jónsson, *Á mörkum mennskunnar*.

³⁰ Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 167–77; Østhus, ‘Contested Authority’, pp. 94–100; Jørn Øyrehagen Sunde, ‘“Lade og ørkesløse betlere”: Fattigforordninga for Bergens stift av 1755 i eit idéhistorisk perspektiv’, in *Fattigfolk i Bergens stift 1755–2005*, ed. by Yngve Nedrebø (Førde: Selja, 2005), pp. 15–33; Johnsson, p. 14; Lis and Soly, pp. 440–68; Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³¹ *Lovsamling for Island*, ed. by Oddgeir Stephensen and Jón Sigurðsson, 23 vols (København: Høst, 1853–1889). Here vol. I, pp. 428–37.

³² *Lovsamling* II, pp. 605–20. See also: Guttormsson, *Childhood, Youth, and Upbringing*; Hanna Östholm and Cristina Prytz, ‘Less than ideal? Making a living before and outside marriage’, in *Making a Living*, ed. by Ågren, pp. 103–26 (p. 108). [Crossref](#). For a nuanced discussion on the household status of servants in law and in practice, see Østhus, ‘Contested Authority’, pp. 179–89.

³³ *Lovsamling* IV, pp. 683–86. On the prison workhouse, see Róbertsdóttir, *Wool and Society*, p. 137.

canic eruption in the autumn of 1783 resulted in thousands of destitute peasants abandoning their ruined farms and roaming the countryside in search of work or alms.³⁴ In 1808 a new decree declared that violators of the laws on compulsory service were to be sentenced with a flogging of 10–20 lashes without the possibility of appeal. This led to a significant increase in court cases against illegal day labourers and vagrants.³⁵

Icelandic historians have provided several explanations for this strict legislation on compulsory service and casual labour, including the need to secure a steady, accessible and relatively cheap labour force,³⁶ the cultural importance of the patriarchal household based on Lutheran principles of obedience and Christian piety,³⁷ the role of service as a way of delaying marriage and childbirth among youths³⁸ and of compulsory service as a method to restrict urbanisation, which was seen by contemporary authorities in Iceland as a socially and economically disruptive process.³⁹ These explanations are generally portrayed as mutually reinforcing, and accurately so. Together they highlight the overall economic, cultural and social importance of the service institution in preindustrial Iceland, with servants being a higher percentage of the population in Iceland than in any other Nordic country in the nineteenth century.⁴⁰

This importance has commonly been explained by referring to the peculiarities of Icelandic society at the time.⁴¹ Indeed, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Iceland was almost entirely a rural farming community. In 1860 some 97% of the population still lived in rural areas.⁴² The economy consisted primarily of pastoral farming at a low technological level, although seasonal fishing on small rowing boats and subsistence hunting of game remained important supplemental sources of income as a large proportion of the male working population would

³⁴ *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784: Ritgerðir og heimildir*, ed. by Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson et al. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1984). This collection of essays remains the primary point of reference for historical analysis of the effects of the eruption in Lakagígur in 1783. For an English-language overview, see: Alexandra Witze, *Island on Fire: The Extraordinary Story of Laki, the Volcano that Turned Eighteenth-Century Europe Dark* (London: Profile Books, 2014).

³⁵ Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 176–78; Leifsson, *Með álfum*, pp. 73–85.

³⁶ Gunnarsson, p. 22.

³⁷ Guttormsson, *Childhood, Youth and Upbringing*.

³⁸ Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*, p. 35.

³⁹ Guðmundur Jónsson, 'Institutional change in Icelandic agriculture, 1780–1940', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 41 (1993), pp. 101–28 (pp. 105–07). [Crossref](#)

⁴⁰ Hanne Østhus, 'Tvunget til tjeneste? Tjenesteplikten i Danmark-Norge på 1700-tallet og begynnelsen av 1800-tallet', *Arbetshistoria*, 41 (2017), 26–31 (p. 28).

⁴¹ Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*, pp. 35–36; Jónsson, 'Institutional change', pp. 103–07; Magnússon, *Wasteland with Words*, pp. 18–24; Loftur Guttormsson, 'Il servizio come istituzione sociale in Islandia e nei paesi nordici', *Quaderni storici*, 68 (1988), pp. 355–79.

⁴² Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*, p. 37.

migrate to fishing stations in the winter season.⁴³ The population was less than 50,000 people in 1800, and settlement was sparse and scattered with a near complete lack of societal infrastructure such as roads and bridges creating considerable obstacles for travellers in the sub-arctic climate. Cheap and accessible labour (i.e. servants) was essential to this near-subsistence economy, as the peasants themselves repeatedly emphasised when writing to the authorities.⁴⁴

One should however be careful not to overstate these peculiarities. Despite being more economically diverse, the other Nordic countries were also primarily rural and agricultural with compulsory service also being the preferred form of labour relations and of great importance to the socio-economic structure (significant regional variation notwithstanding) throughout the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Also, several large-scale experiments in economic diversification were introduced in Iceland in the eighteenth century, including proto-industrial wool manufacturing and export orientated fishing on large decked vessels, which, as historian Hrefna Róbertsdóttir argues, ‘opened new possibilities for people to make a living outside of the traditional farmsteads’.⁴⁶ These experiments were meant to increase specialisation, productivity and product value without disrupting the ‘social equilibrium’ of a social structure based on rural pastoral farming and thus conformed to similar policies adopted by the Danish state in other regions within its domain.⁴⁷

For the purposes of this paper, however, it is primarily the importance of legislation on compulsory service and prohibition of casual labour in terms of social control and labour management that needs to be stressed. These elements sum up the cultural and social influence of these laws and thus their impact on the daily life of the labouring poor who were subject to the provisions of the law in their everyday lives. According to one contemporary author and high ranking official, the essential purpose of compulsory service was to prepare youths in service for

⁴³ Jónsson, ‘Institutional change’, pp. 101–07.

⁴⁴ See, for example, *Landsnefndin fyrri 1770–1771 I: Bréf frá almenningi / Den islandske landkommission I: Breve fra almuen*, ed. by Hrefna Róbertsdóttir and Jóhanna Þ. Guðmundsdóttir (Reykjavík: Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2016), pp. 374–75, 390–91.

⁴⁵ Østhus, ‘Contested Authority’, pp. 39–44; Carolina Uppenberg, ‘The servant institution during the Swedish agrarian revolution: The political economy of subservience’, in *Servants in Rural Europe*, ed. by Whittle, pp. 167–82 (pp. 168–69); Christer Lundh, ‘The social mobility of servants in rural Sweden, 1740–1894’, *Continuity and Change*, 14 (1999), pp. 57–89. [Crossref](#); Beatrice Moring, ‘Nordic family patterns and the north-west European household system’, *Continuity and Change*, 18 (2003), pp. 77–109 (pp. 80–84).

⁴⁶ Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, ‘Manufacturing in the 18th century: Production, consumption and relative usefulness in Iceland’s Old Society’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 39 (2014), 49–77 (p. 60). See also Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 166, 174.

⁴⁷ Róbertsdóttir, ‘Manufacturing in the 18th century’.

becoming upstanding peasants and heads of households themselves.⁴⁸ No less important was the ideal of the moral significance of service, in particular the master-servant relationship, which was supposed to encourage social responsibility on behalf of both masters and servants.⁴⁹ Service was thus seen as a tool for socialization, for social and cultural reproduction, ensuring the continuation of the dominant economic and cultural system of yeoman pastoral farming.⁵⁰ Contemporaries in Iceland thus understood this system in the manner which historians have termed ‘life-cycle service’, where youths would leave their parents’ household and enter a period of service until they could themselves marry and form their own households, although in practice a significant percentage of Icelanders got ‘stuck’ in service for the duration of their working lives.⁵¹

The same contemporary authors also stressed the supposedly detrimental effect of casual labour (Icelandic: *lausamennska*) on both society and the individual. The irregularity and instability of working for daily wages, and more importantly the masterless status and geographical mobility of day labourers, was said to foster immorality and asocial behaviour.⁵² This corresponded with the early modern discourse on the labouring poor in Europe in general, whose archetype was the aimlessly wandering vagrant, able but unwilling to work due to his supposedly inherent laziness, wickedness and immoral lifestyle.⁵³ This was, as Swedish historian

⁴⁸ Magnús Stephensen, *Ræður Hjálmars á Bjargi fyrir börnum sínum um fremd, kosti og anmarka albra stétta og um þeirra almennustu gjöld og tekjur* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999 [1820]), p. 73.

⁴⁹ Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 82–84. For further discussion on the historical context see Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). [Crossref](#); Sarah C. Maza, *Servants and Masters in 18th-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Uppenberg, *I husbondens bröd*, pp. 261–64. As the above studies show, this ideal was rarely, if ever, as harmonious in practice.

⁵⁰ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, ‘Social distinctions and national unity: On politics of nationalism in nineteenth-century Iceland’, *History of European Ideas*, 21 (1995), 763–79 (pp. 768–70). [Crossref](#)

⁵¹ Guttormsson, ‘Il servizio come istituzione sociale’. For a critical analysis and a historiographical overview of the subject of ‘life-cycle service’ see Rafaella Sarti, ‘Criados, servi, domestiques, gesinde, servants: For a comparative history of domestic service in Europe (16th to 19th centuries)’, *Obradoiro de Historia Moderna*, 16 (2007), 9–39. See also Whittle, pp. 3–8.

⁵² Sigurður Björnsson, ‘Um hússtjórnina á Íslandi’, *Búnaðarvit Suðuramtsins húss- og bússtjórnarfélags*, 1 (1839), 94–138 (pp. 95–96); Sigmundur Sigmundsson, ‘Til hvørs eru kóngsbréfin um betlara og lausamenn, okur og práng?’, *Margvíslegt gaman og alvara*, 1 (1798), 53–69 (pp. 62–66). For further citations see Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 187–200.

⁵³ Lis and Soly, pp. 478–79; Jütte, pp. 143–53. See also Paul Griffiths, ‘Masterless young people in Norwich, 1560–1645’, in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, ed. by Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), pp. 146–86. [Crossref](#)

Theresa Johnsson and many others have shown, an obfuscating discourse, reducing a complex and diverse group of people, whose shared characteristics were first and foremost not having a master or permanent residency in one place and generally survived off of an economy of makeshifts, to a single category, a social status which could be (and was) criminalized.⁵⁴

In Iceland day labourers were commonly associated with vagrancy and begging in public discourse as well as the law.⁵⁵ Indeed, the decree from 1783 which forbade casual labour should be regarded in conjunction with new legislation passed around the same time which was directly aimed at limiting vagrancy and controlling labour mobility.⁵⁶ In 1781 a decree reiterated and tightened pre-existing legislation stating that anyone travelling between regions should have a passport signed and stamped by county magistrates (and not just by local ministers and constables as had previously been the case) and required that household heads should report to the authorities anyone who arrived at their home without legal documentation. This decree was explicitly aimed at restricting vagrancy and casual labour.⁵⁷ Regulations for the workhouse in Reykjavík, dated from 1784, stated that anyone under 30 years of age that was arrested for vagrancy or begging should be sent 'without due process to the workhouse' for work rehabilitation for an unspecified period of time.⁵⁸ All three decrees were the result of efforts by the authorities to pass a new police ordinance in Iceland in the early 1770s, work that was never completed.⁵⁹ However, in the following years several officials wrote letters to the government in Copenhagen describing their plight in dealing with what they de-

⁵⁴ Johnsson, pp. 21–27; Winter, pp. 249–77; Patricia Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁵⁵ Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 187–201. Hanne Østhus also discusses the entanglement of service and vagrancy in eighteenth century legislation in Denmark and Norway. See Østhus, 'Contested Authority', pp. 98–99.

⁵⁶ Róbertsdóttir, *Wool and Society*, pp. 162–63; Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 171–75. Theresa Johnsson further discusses the control of mobility and use of passports as a means of controlling labourers and their wages and conditions. See Johnsson, pp. 101–02.

⁵⁷ *Lovsamling IV*, pp. 580–582. Similar legislation existed in many European countries in the early modern period, including Denmark, Norway and Sweden. See: Valentin Groebner, *Who Are You? Indentification, Deception and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2007); Tyge Krogh, *Staten og de besiddelsesløse på landet 1500–1800* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1987), p. 66–70; Anna-Brita Lövgren, *Staten och folk på väg: Pass i Sverige från Gustav Vasas tid till 1860* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2018).

⁵⁸ *Lovsamling V*, pp. 15: 'paa en summarisk Maade skal dömmе ham i Tugthuset i nogen Tid'.

⁵⁹ Harald Gustafsson, *Mellan kung och allmoge: Ämbetsmän, beslutsprocess och inflytande på 1700-talets Island* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1985), pp. 142–61; Róbertsdóttir, *Wool and Society*, pp. 154–56.

scribed as widespread vagrancy and unruliness of servants in their localities. It was based on their complaints that the new legislation was passed, explicitly following the outline of the police ordinance which had been drafted in 1771 as well as the decree on compulsory service in Norway from 1754.⁶⁰

Survival strategies

It is in light of this legal framework that the combination of tactics (or ‘repertoire of practices’) which make up the survival strategies of vagrants and day labourers will be analysed and discussed in this article. Although, as historian Jeremy Boulton writes, ‘survival strategies’ (a phrase which he deliberately places in quotation marks) were more often than not a temporary solution making such efforts a ‘mixed blessing’ at best,⁶¹ the concept is useful nonetheless since it foregrounds the agency of the poor in their efforts to survive the tribulations of their everyday lives. Agency is, in this sense, not the equivalent of rational free choice, but rather what anthropologist Laura Ahearn describes as a ‘socioculturally mediated capacity to act’ within contexts which are fraught with historically shaped social relations, material limitations and power regimes which limit, constrict and guide the range of actions possible.⁶² That capacity is present nonetheless and, as anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner has argued, agency should be seen as an ‘interactively negotiated’ practice within webs of relations which are socially constructed, rather than a distinct quality which one either possesses or not.⁶³ This is evident in the case of Árni Sveinsson. Obviously many episodes which directly affected his life were beyond his control and his capacity to act was restricted by sociocultural constructions which limited the options available to him. His actions were nevertheless conducted in correspondence with his interpretation of his surroundings, the context in which he acted, and he developed a ‘repertoire of practices’ which he applied to negotiate his place within society and helped him navigate the social and cultural space in which he found himself.

⁶⁰ Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 170–76.

⁶¹ Jeremy Boulton, “‘It is extreme necessity that makes me do this’”: Some “survival strategies” of pauper households in London’s West End during the early eighteenth century’, *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), 47–69 (p. 60). [Crossref](#)

⁶² Laura Ahearn, ‘Language and agency’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30 (2001), 109–37 (p. 112). [Crossref](#). For further discussion on this understanding of the concept of agency see Christian G. De Vito, ‘History without scale: The micro-spatial perspective’, *Past & Present*, 242 Supplement 14 (2019), pp. 359–60. [Crossref](#)

⁶³ Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). [Crossref](#)

Mobility

Although the information available is fragmentary and somewhat misleading, since he was repeatedly caught lying during his interrogation, it seems that Árni was born in 1776 and raised in southern Iceland where he was twice married before turning to vagrancy.⁶⁴ He had lived as a cottar (Icelandic: *tómthúismaður*), a fisherman living in a cottage without any livestock, in Vatnsleysuströnd, a fishing community in the southwest, until 1811, when he became a servant for a priest in the distant Westfjords for a short period of time, returning to southern Iceland later that same year. After spending several years moving back and forth between fishing communities in two different counties (Árnessýsla and Gullbringusýsla) in southern Iceland, together with his second wife and two young children, he seems to have been forced by the local authorities to separate from his family sometime in the winter of 1815–16 due to his apparent inability to provide for them (and thus to prevent them from having more children that would become a burden on the local poor relief fund).⁶⁵ He then began wandering around looking for work.⁶⁶ According to his testimony, he had studied books on medicine and botany during his youth when he was a servant for Jakob Árnason, a clergyman and at that time a teacher in the Reykjavík Latin School and himself a well-known healer, and gradually began his healing practices as he travelled from one part of the country to another.⁶⁷ He arrived in Húnavatnssýsla in 1816 where he ‘assisted many in reclaiming their health’, as he stated before the court,⁶⁸ roaming around northern

⁶⁴ The magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla wrote to his colleagues in southern Iceland in January 1821 to inquire about Árni's affairs, noting that due to his untrustworthy and contradictory testimony he suspected that Árni had eloped from his marital duties and was on the run from the authorities. See: National Archives of Iceland (NAI), Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu, C/2–2. Bréfabók (1820–1823). Björn Blöndal to the magistrates of Árnessýsla and Gullbringusýsla, January 1821.

⁶⁵ The dissolution of families was a common solution to pauperism and supported by the poor relief legislation in eighteenth and nineteenth century Iceland. See: Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, ‘Fattigvården på Island under 1700-talet’, in *Oppdaginga av fattigdommen: Sosial lovgivning i Norden på 1700-talet* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1983), pp. 187–215; Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson ‘The poor laws and the family in 19th century Iceland’, in *The Nordic Family: Perspectives on Family Research*, ed. by John Rogers and Hans Norman (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1985), pp. 16–42.

⁶⁶ NAI, Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu, GA/6–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1820–1823), 1v–2r; NAI, Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1819–1821), 62r; 63v–64r; NAI, Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu, C/2–2. Bréfabók (1820–1823). Björn Blöndal to the magistrates of Árnessýsla and Gullbringusýsla, January 1821.

⁶⁷ NAI, Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu, GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1819–1821), 64r–64v; Magnús Guðjónsson, ‘Gaulverjabær í Flóa’, *Kirkjuritið*, 26 (1960), pp. 270–71.

⁶⁸ NAI, Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/6–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1820–1823), 2v, ‘hiálpad mörgum til heilsu’.

Iceland healing local peasants, collecting herbs to make medicine and taking on odd jobs such as joining a shark-fishing vessel for a short while, until he was finally arrested in December 1820.

A core characteristic of vagrancy is homelessness, and that was – along with presumed idleness – one of the main reasons vagrants were regarded as a social problem. Not having fixed settlement means being outside the gaze of the authorities. Such individuals are difficult to tax, they cannot be drafted into the military or for other civic duties, have their property assessed and the authorities cannot measure if or how such individuals conform to legal, moral or social codes of conduct. Laws on settlement, poor relief, mobility, vagrancy and labour were interconnected in early modern Europe precisely to deal with this, as they sought to control who could and should reside in any given locality and thus limit the possibility of anyone slipping through the cracks.⁶⁹

Hence it goes without saying that a primary tactic for those vagrants and day labourers who wished to avoid detection and apprehension by the authorities was to stay mobile. A county magistrate in western Iceland wrote in a report to the authorities in Copenhagen in 1781 that it was nearly impossible to catch illegal day labourers since they simply changed residence and moved to a different county whenever the local authorities got wind of their presence. More often than not they did so with the assistance of locals who had made use of their labour services and also wished to avoid the grasp of the law.⁷⁰

To add to the problem, local custom in Iceland demanded that when visitors arrived at each home they were to be offered overnight stay and a meal. The concept *gestanætur* (literally translated as ‘visitor nights’) reflects this ancient custom of hospitality and relates to the unwritten rule that households should provide lodging for up to three nights for visitors regardless of social standing. Harsh winters in the sub-arctic climate of Iceland and a lack of societal infrastructure meant that not doing so could be akin to a death sentence for travellers.⁷¹ The provision of invalids and the deserving poor; those willing but unable to provide for themselves, also included permission to migrate according to specific routes within the community and receive alms, as the law had decreed since the thirteenth century and until 1834, when new poor laws were introduced.⁷² Able-bodied vagrants,

⁶⁹ Innes, King and Winter, pp. 11–15; Paul Ocobock, ‘Introduction: Vagrancy and homelessness in global and historical perspective’, in *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective*, ed. by A. L. Beier and Paul Ocobock (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), pp. 1–34 (pp. 1–2).

⁷⁰ NAI. Hið danska kansellí. KA/29–41. Bréfasafn (1781–1781). Litt. B. Copie extract af nogle af de verdslige betienende i Island forslage angaaende lösemændene.

⁷¹ Jónsson, *Á mörkum mennskunnar*, pp. 164–66.

⁷² *Ibid*, pp. 52–53, 78–79.

those deemed able but unwilling to work and thus the principal subjects of state efforts to eradicate the ‘problem’ of vagrancy, took advantage of this custom and commonly travelled through local communities by moving from one farm to the next and staying for a short while in each place presumably without ever being reported.⁷³ Some invented fake names and fabricated stories about their dire circumstances in order to gain sympathy, such as the absconding servant Jón Jónsson who, having fled from his master, travelled around northern and western Iceland in 1835–36 under the pretence that he had been an impoverished peasant in a distant region but that he had been driven off his croft and his family split up by the authorities.⁷⁴ Not least because of such tactics, local authorities regularly found reason to issue proclamations reminding peasants that it was against the law to provide lodgings to vagrants and others without passports.⁷⁵

Árni himself was highly mobile. During his trial a total of thirty-eight local peasants were interrogated about his stay in their homes and each one took care to note that he had only stayed with them for a few nights before moving on.⁷⁶ The decrees of 1781 and 1783 had declared that anyone who provided room and board for illegal day labourers or vagrants for any extended period was subject to heavy fines or even the pillory and it seems that locals were well aware of this. Every witness denied having housed him for any extended period. One man in particular, Guðmundur Jónsson from Stóridalur (1749–1847), was adamant that Árni had only stayed with him for a few days. He was questioned extensively on the subject since rumour had it that Árni had stayed with him for several months providing medical assistance to his wife.⁷⁷ Guðmundur Jónsson was eventually fined for housing Árni for extended periods.

⁷³ Court proceedings contain many descriptions of this practice. See for example NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Eyjafjarðarsýslu. GA/3–4. Dóma- og þingbók (1809–1813), 149r–154r; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Skagafjarðarsýslu. GA/4–1. Dóma- og þingbók (1799–1811), pp. 531–37. See also Leifsson, ‘Flökkufólk’, p. 107. One of the vagrants Yngvi Leifsson studied had spent some time in eighty-five households without being reported, and was only rarely asked for any legal documents.

⁷⁴ NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/8–2. Dóma- og þingbók (1835–1837), pp. 519–23.

⁷⁵ See for example NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/5–2. Dóma- og þingbók (1807–1812), p. 122; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1819–1821), p. 376; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/7–1. Dóma- og þingbók (1825–1827), p. 506; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/9–1. Dóma- og þingbók (1837–1842), p. 278. These are only a few samples. There are many similar proclamations in court records from all over Iceland.

⁷⁶ All thirty-eight individuals handed in written testimonies in Árni’s defence, in addition to being interrogated in person. These testimonies can be found in: NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GB/3–7. Dómsskjöl (1822–1822).

⁷⁷ NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1819–1821), 46r–48v.

Even before his period of actual vagrancy Árni had for several years travelled regularly between counties in southern Iceland in search of work. This was not unusual. In fact seasonal labour migration was integral to the economy as peasants, servants and day labourers moved to fishing communities on the southwestern coast during the winter season from February to May, when there was less work to do on the farms, only to return to farm labour for the rest of the year. An extreme example of this is the parish Hvalsnes, a fishing community on the Reykjanes peninsula in southwestern Iceland, where 86% of winter season fishing boat crews in the late eighteenth century had permanent residence outside the parish.⁷⁸ Another study has shown that the migration of servants was considerable, with up to 70% of servants in some parishes in the census of 1816 being born outside the parish.⁷⁹ From the time Árni had arrived in the county of Húnavatnssýsla in 1816 until he was finally apprehended in December 1820 he had travelled all over western and northern Iceland. Thus in the autumn of 1816 he went back to the southern region for a while before returning to Húnavatnssýsla in the spring of 1817 following a trek through Dalasýsla and Strandasýsla in the western part of the country. He spent some time in Skagafjarðarsýsla as well before joining a shark fishing vessel in Eyjafjarðarsýsla in 1818 or 1819. He seems to have been able to move about without much interference from the authorities. The court case in Húnavatnssýsla around Christmas 1820 is the only record of his wanderings and the first and only time he was tried for vagrancy, even though a posthumous account states that he remained a vagrant and travelling healer for the rest of his life.⁸⁰

Document fraud

All of the people questioned during the trial also stated that they had not asked Árni to see his passport, despite being legally required to do so. One peasant explicitly stated that he had not thought of it since Árni had been 'in this county for a while' without any problems.⁸¹ He had thus assumed that Árni had all his legal documents in order. He did not. In response to the magistrate's queries on the matter, he claimed to have had a pass signed by the magistrate in Árnessýsla in southern Iceland when he arrived in Húnavatnssýsla in the summer of 1816

⁷⁸ Loftur Guttormsson, 'Population, households and fisheries in the parish of Hvalsnes, southwestern Iceland, 1750–1850', *Acta Borealia*, 28 (2011), 142–66 (p. 162). [Crossref](#)

⁷⁹ Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*, p. 77.

⁸⁰ Icelandic National Library (Lbs.). Lbs. 2285 4to. Amlóði. Safn af ýmsum frásögnum og ritum samantínt á Höfða af Sighvati Gr. Borgfirðing 1892–1895, pp. 134–39.

⁸¹ NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1819–1821, p., 55r. 'Nokkra stund verid í þessari sýslu'.

but that he had left it at a distant farm some months earlier. It turned out that the passport in question had originally been given to him in 1811 when travelling from the Westfjords to his home county of Árnessýsla, where upon arrival the passport was again signed by the local parish minister. It had never been updated when the trial took place, even though such passes were by law only valid for six months.⁸² He had thus not had any legally valid documents for seven years or so when he was finally apprehended in 1820.⁸³

This seems to have been common. Examples abound where vagrants and day labourers had either 'lost' their passes or the peasants who had provided them with lodging had never asked to see them.⁸⁴ Indeed, it seems that the law requiring the use of passports was not taken very seriously and only haphazardly upheld. In 1810 the county magistrate in Skagafjarðarsýsla wrote, when sentencing a peasant for providing lodging for a vagrant woman, that 'until now, people have not had any reason to fear the decree of 11 April 1781 [on the use of passports]'.⁸⁵ One month earlier the district governor had written an open letter to all magistrates condemning the apparently widespread disregard for this law and ordering them to diligently uphold it.⁸⁶ Such exhortations by county magistrates and district governors continue to appear with some frequency in county archives in the following decades suggesting that many peasants kept on ignoring this decree or were at least ambivalent about it. Passport control was similarly haphazard in eighteenth century Denmark it seems. Not only did escaped convict Rasmus Schmidt manage to exit Copenhagen through one of the city portals without presenting a passport, he also was not once during an entire year on the loose, working casual jobs and sometimes begging, asked to present his passport, despite having acquired himself a forged one on the black market, which seems to have been quite common.⁸⁷

Árni Sveinsson had also acquired a passport through forgery and deception. In the autumn of 1818 he had arrived in the home of the county magistrate with a letter from the aforementioned Guðmundur Jónsson of Stóridalur. The letter stated that Árni had been his servant for two years and was now travelling to another

⁸² *Lovsamling* IV, p. 582.

⁸³ NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1819–1821), 61v–62r; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. C/2–2. Bréfabók (1820–1823). Björn Blöndal to the magistrates of Árnessýsla and Gullbringusýsla, January 1821.

⁸⁴ See for example Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, pp. 206–08, 221–22; Leifsson, 'Flökkufólk', pp. 22, 31, 40–41, 44, 70, 73, 92.

⁸⁵ NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Skagafjarðarsýslu. GA/4–1. Dóma- og þingbók (1799–1811), p. 487. 'fólk hefur enga ordsök haft hingad til að óttast for. af 11ta April 1781'.

⁸⁶ NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Skagafjarðarsýslu. B/136. Amtsbréf um vegabréfslausa menn 1786–1825. Circulaire of 30 March 1810.

⁸⁷ Heinsen, 'Straffefanger på fri fod', p. 6.

county to join a shark fishing vessel for the winter season on behalf of his master (it was common for peasants to send their servants to man boats during fishing season, where they worked on their masters' behalf).⁸⁸ The magistrate diligently signed the pass and handed it to Áрни. It later turned out that Áрни had forged the letter from Guðmundur Jónsson and signed it using stolen insignia with the letters G and J. This had caused the magistrate in question some embarrassment so that when a formal complaint was filed against Áрни for vagrancy and illegal healing practices the following year, the magistrate ignored it. He wrote to the constable who had apprehended Áрни that since the case would cause him great embarrassment the constable should simply escort Áрни outside the county line but otherwise leave him be.⁸⁹

No research has been done on the extent of such forgeries and fraud in Iceland in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries although some cases are known.⁹⁰ As historian Valentin Groebner has argued, forgeries, fraud and identity theft went hand in hand with the growth of identification technologies and the use of passports and other identification documents in early modern Europe.⁹¹ Recent studies suggest that the use of forged travel documents was common in Sweden and Denmark as well.⁹² For a short period passport laws in Denmark even included a clause that passes should be written in Latin to prevent forgeries.⁹³ In Iceland, an additional decree in 1808 stated that, in order to prevent fraudulent use, passports should include physical descriptions of their bearers, indicating that fraudulent use of passes was known or at least foreseen by the authorities.⁹⁴ Another decree from 1808 places the responsibility of passport control on local constables and it seems that the previously haphazard passport control became more systematic from 1810 onwards, at least in Reykjavík and the surrounding area, although the limited research that has been done so far indicates that there continued to be some regional differences in passport control vigilance.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Magnússon, *Iceland in Transition*, pp. 38–39.

⁸⁹ NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1819–1821), 48r–49r, 58v–59r, 73v–75v; GB/3–1. Documents (1820–1820). Magistrate Jón Jónsson to constable Vorm Beck, 24 December 1819.

⁹⁰ Jón Óskar, *Sölvi Helgason: Listamaður á hrakningi. Heimildasaga* (Reykjavík: Ísafold, 1984).

⁹¹ Groebner, pp. 183–221.

⁹² Johnsson, pp. 301, 313, 363, 425–26; Johan Heinsen, 'Straffefanger på fri fod', p. 6; Johan Heinsen, 'Ind og ud af slaverierne: Den dansk-norske stats straffearbejdere i tidligt modern tid', *Arbejderhistorie*, 22 (2018), 11–31 (p. 25). [Crossref](#)

⁹³ Krogh, pp. 66–70.

⁹⁴ *Lovsamling* VII, p. 225.

⁹⁵ Emil Gunnlaugsson, 'Sína leið siglir hver. Vegabréfa- og passakerfið á Íslandi á 18. og 19. öld' (report, National Archives of Iceland, 2019). Online: https://heimildir.is/files/Vegabref_grein.pdf (accessed 22 July 2020)

Social capital

On the basis of these tactics of evasion and fraud, Áрни could pursue his assumed profession as a travelling healer. It seems that his services were much appreciated by the local community, and this was perhaps the most important element in his long lasting avoidance of the authorities: He provided a service that was of importance for local society. In that sense, he had acquired a form of social capital which he could make use of to avoid apprehension by the authorities and which he continued to use to his advantage after his trial began.⁹⁶ Through social networking, individuals in precarious social situations such as Áрни could expand their 'space for action', as historians Hanna Östholm and Cristina Prytz argue, and put it to use to find employment, housing, economic and emotional support and assistance when faced with trouble.⁹⁷ All of the thirty-eight individuals who were questioned in his case had provided written testimonies describing his efforts to heal them or their family members, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, with honest intentions and without receiving any payment. This last part was of utmost importance, since the authorities were particularly concerned with those who 'trick the simple public into buying overpriced mishmash disguised as medicine' and demand payment for their efforts, as Surgeon General Jón Sveinsson wrote to Iceland's governor in 1788. 'Such persons', he continued, 'are dangerous for the State, as they ... spend their time in idleness and vagrancy, living off of the sweat of others'.⁹⁸

All of the persons who testified in his case asked for leniency for Áрни as he had been of no nuisance in their homes or communities. Rather, he had provided them with necessary services – without remuneration – which were otherwise difficult to procure in rural localities that were often isolated for long periods during the winter. When his case reached the upper echelons of the court system in the Icelandic High Court in Reykjavík, the Chief Justice Magnús Stephensen wrote in his argumentation that the law from 5 September 1794 prohibiting anyone from practicing medicine without a license was in fact a burden for Iceland and its inhabitants due to the difficulties resulting from the lack of licensed practitioners.

⁹⁶ On the importance of establishing horizontal networks as a form of social capital as part of the survival strategies of the poor, see Fontaine and Schlumbohm, pp. 13–14.

⁹⁷ Östholm and Prytz, p. 120.

⁹⁸ Cited in Lárus H. Blöndal and Vilmundur Jónsson, *Læknar á Íslandi I* (Reykjavík: Læknafélag Íslands 1970), p. 69. '... forblinde den enfoldige Almue ikke alleene til at kiøbe ald Mismask hvad de har under Navn af Medicamenter med overdrevene priser, men og underholde sig for intet og desuden tage Betaling for sin Umage ... Hvilke Mennsker ... ere dog farlige for Staten, som de der altid er i Stand til at forderve, og som ved Afholdenhed fra Arbeede drive Tiden hen med Ledig- og Løsgængerie, leve af andres Sved og bedrage'.

He also raised doubts as to whether the decree in question was in effect in Iceland. He thus summarily dismissed the charge of unlicensed medical practices while upholding the sentence of a flogging of eighteen lashes that Áрни received for forgery and vagrancy.⁹⁹

The status of vagrants and day labourers and their reception in local society thus seems to have depended on their ability to gain social capital by providing useful services regardless of the strict prohibition of the law. In his recent book on vagrancy in Icelandic pre-modern culture folklorist Jón Jónsson recounts multiple examples, culled from autobiographies, ethnographic questionnaires and similar sources, of vagrants providing services to peasants in return for lodging, food and other basic necessities.¹⁰⁰ In many cases these were tedious jobs which others avoided or tasks tainted with dishonour, such as slaughtering horses or even allocating corporal punishment – effectually becoming temporary executioners – on the behalf of local authorities.¹⁰¹ In fact, the lashes which Áрни Sveinsson was sentenced to receive were given to him by a vagrant in Strandasýsla in western Iceland a few months later. As the story goes, the flogging was so light that Áрни and his executioner went on a drinking bout afterwards ‘and called each other friends’.¹⁰²

Besides the case of Áрни Sveinsson there are many references in the archives of county magistrates to situations where the local peasantry either harboured vagrants or undocumented day labourers, despite facing possible indictment themselves, or at the very least made use of their services without reporting them to the authorities. These included simple or tedious tasks such as transporting letters or assisting with the hay harvest but also specialised labour such as carpentry, turf cutting or cooperage.¹⁰³ Many historians have noted similar discrepancies in the application of laws

⁹⁹ *Landsyfírréttardómar og hæstaréttardómar í íslenskum málum*, 11 vols (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1916–1986), here vol. II, pp. 328–31. The law forbade any unlicensed person from practicing medicine regardless of whether they received remuneration or not. See: *Lövsamling VI*, pp. 190–92.

¹⁰⁰ Jónsson, *Á mörkum mennskunnar*, pp. 85–97. See also Leifsson, ‘Flökkufólk’, p. 107.

¹⁰¹ No historical research exists on dishonourable professions or notions of dishonour in early modern Iceland. For the notion of dishonourable work in early modern Europe, see Kathy Stuart, *Defiled Trades and Social Outcasts: Honor and Ritual Pollution in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). [Crossref](#). For a discussion of horse butchers as dishonourable in Norway in the late eighteenth century see: Erling Sandmo, ‘Æren og ærekrenkelsen’, in *Normer og sosial kontroll i Norden ca 1550–1850: Domstolene i samspill med lokalsamfunnet*, Det 22. Nordiske historikermøte. Oslo 13.–18. august 1994. Rapport II, ed. by Kåre Tønnesson (Oslo: Den norske historiske forening, 1994), pp. 81–86.

¹⁰² Gísli Konráðsson, *Húnavetninga saga*, ed. and compiled by Jón Torfason (Reykjavík: Mál og mynd, 1998), p. 569: ‘... og kölluðu hvor annan vin sinn’.

¹⁰³ NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Skagafjarðarsýslu. GA/4–1. Dóma- og þingbók (1799–1811), pp. 531–37; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Skagafjarðarsýslu. GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1832–1838), 68v–70r, 79v–80v.; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. B/14–6. Bréfasafn. Sigurður Ár-

on settlement, vagrancy and day labour, making its everyday practice a sort of ‘negotiated space’ in which a variety of actors – officials, employers, community leaders and the labouring poor themselves – attempted to influence affairs, to ‘negotiate’ the power relations involved to their benefit, at least as the context allowed.¹⁰⁴ As Theresa Johnsson reminds us, in regard to the status of vagrants in early nineteenth century Sweden at least, this does not necessarily indicate that a reciprocal relationship existed between local peasants and vagrants or day labourers but could also simply mean that the latter were tolerated as long as they were useful but were otherwise dismissed as unwelcome.¹⁰⁵ Whatever the reason, a culture of reciprocity or simple self-interest, sources nevertheless indicate that peasants in Iceland regularly housed and actively concealed illegal day labourers and vagrants from the authorities and that concealment of this type was an important tool for everyday survival for those subsisting on the margins of the law.

Concluding remarks

Vagrants and day labourers employed various tactics in order to manipulate their legal, social and cultural surroundings and survive outside of the legally proscribed

nason to Björn Blöndal 8 June 1836; Sigurður Árnason to Björn Blöndal 14 September 1836; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/5–2. Dóma- og þingbók (1807–1812), pp. 264–66; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/6–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1820–1823), pp. 6–10, 123–29, 131; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/7–1. Dóma- og þingbók (1825–1827), pp. 86–89; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/5–2. Dóma- og þingbók (1827–1830), pp. 32–35; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/8–2. Dóma- og þingbók (1835–1837), pp. 534–37; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/9–1. Dóma- og þingbók (1837–1842), pp. 263–65; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Húnavatnssýslu. GA/7–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1850–1855), pp. 256–59; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Gullbringusýslu. GA/4–2. Dómabók (1819–1832), pp. 7–11; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Eyjafjarðarsýslu. GA/3–4. Dóma- og þingbók (1809–1813), pp. 149r–154r; NAI. Sýslumaðurinn í Eyjafjarðarsýslu. GA/5–2. Dóma- og þingbók (1827–1831), pp. 219–26. All of the above cases are discussed to some extent in my doctoral thesis. see Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*. Other examples can be found in Leifsson, *Mæð álfum*, pp. 73–85 and Þórunn Þorsteinsdóttir, ‘Lestir lausamennsku og lífnaður við sjávarsíðuna. Afbrot og siðferði á Akureyri 1810–1840’ (bachelor’s thesis, University of Iceland, 2017), pp. 33–40.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Michael J. Braddick and John Walter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). [Crossref](#); Winter, ‘“Vagrancy” as an adaptive strategy’; Audrey Eccles, *Vagrancy in Law and Practice under the Old Poor Law* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). [Crossref](#); Dag Lindström, Rosemarie Fiebranz, Jonas Lindström, Jan Mispelaere, and Göran Rydén, ‘Working together’, in *Making a Living*, ed. by Ågren, pp. 57–79 (p. 67). [Crossref](#); Hitchcock, Crymble and Falcini, ‘Loose, idle and disorderly’.

¹⁰⁵ Johnsson, pp. 214, 267, 373, 496.

framework of compulsory service and yeoman pastoral farming. Their reasons for doing so were varied. Some were forced by necessity to do so. Others found themselves poorly suited to living within such a rigid framework and preferred different lifestyles free from the discipline of masters and the dominant moral values of hard work and subservience. Still others had specialized in particular tasks but were not legally permitted to work their trade. All three reasons could easily apply to Árni Sveinsson, as has been recounted above. Regardless of their reasons for abandoning the dominant system of labour relations and the cultural norms associated with compulsory service, all vagrants and illegal day labourers had to concoct ways to either evade the authorities or find other ways to survive. In other words, they had to ‘negotiate’ their way within and around the power relations of preindustrial society which, in Iceland just as elsewhere, was always of a ‘conditional nature’, as historians Michael Braddick and John Walter argue.¹⁰⁶ Successful application of the law depended in those settings on the coalition of central and local interests, where the law had to be understood and interpreted within the boundaries of moral economy and was thus subject to the manoeuvres and tactics of individuals seeking to survive on the margins of the law as well as its pragmatic interpretation by peasants and state officials.¹⁰⁷ By making themselves useful vagrants and day labourers could gain acceptance by the community – a form of social capital – which would in turn become complicit in their evasion of the authorities. Networking within local society in order to gain social capital and evade the law was complemented by more practical strategies including a high degree of mobility as well as fraud and forgery when necessary. Vagrants and day labourers thus had to make use of a repertoire of tactics and skills in order to get by. Their rate of success is, however, impossible to gauge since our sources on the matter are almost exclusively the court records of county magistrates, created when someone failed to evade the authorities and got caught.

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¹⁰⁶ Michael J. Braddick and John Walter, ‘Introduction. Grids of power: Order, hierarchy and subordination in early modern society’, in *Negotiating Power*, ed. by Braddick and Walter, pp. 1–42 (p. 15). [Crossref](#)

¹⁰⁷ For further discussion see Innes, King and Winter, ‘Introduction’.