



HAWKERS, BEGGARS, ASSASSINS AND TRAMPS: FRINGE CHARACTERS IN THE *ÍSLENDINGA SÖGUR*

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Saga society is one which is made up of links, of social bonds, between individuals and groups. Slaves are tied by a bond of ownership to farmers. Workers are also tied to farmers by year-long terms of service. Farmers in turn declare themselves in *þing* with a *goði*. Groups are also linked by kinship bonds, or bonds created by marriage. Although these bonds can occasionally be changed or adjusted, people did not oscillate between social groups. What then of saga characters who have no social bonds – no support structure but also no loyalties or responsibilities? In this paper I'm going to look at some examples of the character of the vagrant in the *Íslendinga sögur*; and, in particular, at how such characters seek to use their position on the fringes of saga society and their lack of social bonds to their advantage.

It may be useful to begin with a few definitions. “Vagrants” are characters with no fixed abode who move more or less continually about the countryside. They are always portrayed in a negative light in the sagas. They are scurrilous, mercenary, treacherous and manipulative and almost never have social or kinship links of significance. Those vagrants whose names are given in the sagas have only forenames, perhaps with a nickname, but no patronymic. There are a number of nouns that a saga author might use for a vagrant. He might be a *göngumaðr* or *göngukona* or *göngusveinn*, a *reikanarmaðr*, *húsgangmaðr*, *einhleypismaðr* or a *stafkarl*, to list but a few. While these words clearly have slightly different connotations, they are used relatively freely by saga authors and occasionally interchanged. The majority of these characters seem to be merely beggars, however some do have some small wares for sale. This makes them similar to the character of the hawker or peddler, the *mangari* or *mangismaðr*, a character portrayed in a similarly negative light in the sagas.

Another term that requires some definition is “saga society”, by which I mean the semi-fictional world of saga-age. Unlike more central saga characters, it is impossible to prove or disprove the existence of an individual vagabond character. Given the usefulness of such characters to progress saga plots, it seems likely that the majority are fictional, mere plot devices. It is therefore difficult to draw conclusions from the *Íslendinga sögur* about the



position of vagrants in real, historical Icelandic society in the tenth and eleventh century. Rather, one might draw some conclusions regarding the attitude of the original author and their readership towards such people. Thus the *Íslendinga sögur* probably shed more light on the attitudes of people in the age of saga-writing towards vagrants, rather than the saga-age itself.

Before turning to the sagas themselves, it may be worth looking briefly at how vagrants are dealt with in Old Icelandic law. *Grágás* does have some provision for legal vagrants, beggars permitted to travel from place to place either in a district or larger area. However the majority of the provisions seem to apply chiefly to the illegal vagrant, those vagrants who had no good reason to be on the road:

Þat er ómennska ef maðr gengr með húsum fyrir nenningarleysis sakir eða ókosta annarra þeira er góðir menn vilja fyrir þeim sökum eigi hafa þau.¹

[It is perversity if a man or woman goes as a vagrant from house to house because of indolence or such other failings as make good men unwilling to have them.]²

Here the word *ómennska* chiefly seeks to divide the legal from illegal vagrant. Thus the vagrant who travels for the sake of stubbornness, is different from one whose journey is legally licensed. Nevertheless the word implies that unmanliness and even inhumanity was associated with vagrants. It seems that vagrants were not only on the fringe of social structure, but also on the very edge of acceptability. *Grágás* states that illegal vagrants could not inherit or claim personal injury.³ There was no penalty for the seduction of a vagrant woman.⁴ It was legal to castrate a vagrant, who could not then claim for any permanent injury or death resulting from this and it was actually illegal for people to offer food or lodgings to a vagrants.⁵ In fact one of the defences for offering a vagrant lodging was that you had invited him in expressly for the purpose of giving him a good hiding.⁶

Turning to the sagas we find a slightly more tolerant attitude towards vagrants. *Gísla saga Súrssonar* describes a vagrant, a *göngumaðr*, named Hallbjörn.

Maðr er nefndr Hallbjörn; hann var göngumaðr ok fór um heruðin eigi með færi menn en tíu eða tólf, en hann tjaldaði sér búð á þinginu. Þangat fara sveinarnir ok biðja hann búðarrúms ok segjask vera göngumenn. Hann kvezk veita búðarrúm hverjum þeim, er hann vill beitt hafa. - “Hefi ek hér verit mǫrg vár,” sagði hann, “ok kenni ek alla hǫfðingja ok goðorðsmenn.” Þeir sveinarnir segja, at þeir vildi hlíta hans ásjá ok fræðask af honum; - “er okkr mikil forvitni á at sjá stóreflismenn, þar er miklar sǫgur ganga frá.” Hallbjörn kvezk mundu fara ofan til strandar ok



sagðisk mundu kenna hvert skip skjótliga, sem kœmi, ok segja þeim til. Þeir biðja hann hafa þökk fyrir léttlæti sitt.⁷

[A man was named Hallbjörn; he was a vagrant and travelled about the districts with no fewer than ten or twelve men and tented himself a booth at the assembly. The boys [Helgi and Bergr Vésteinsson] went there and asked him for booth-lodgings and said that they were vagrants. He said that he granted booth-lodgings to anyone who would ask him for it. “I have been here many springs,” he said, “and I recognise all the chieftains and *goðorð*-men.” The boys said that they wanted to trust in his protection and learn from him. “We are very curious to see the great men, those whom the great stories are about.” Hallbjörn said that he would go down to the shore and said that he would recognise each ship as soon as it arrived and tell them. They thanked him for his friendliness.]

While the majority of male vagrants in the sagas travel alone, Hallbjörn travels with never less than ten to twelve men. He does not shy away from society, as he has a booth at the Þorskaþing, where lots of other vagrants stay. This is actually not as unlikely as one might first think. The laws in fact did permit vagrants to have booths at assemblies, provided they did not start begging.⁸ Thus despite being on the fringes of society Hallbjörn is actually tolerated by that society. Furthermore he seems to have created his own sub-society, a counter-culture in which he is a chieftain among tramps. It is very much on these terms that the brothers, Helgi and Bergr Vésteinsson approach him. They flatter him by saying how they too are vagrants and want to learn from him. It is of course this flattery that persuades him to name each of the chieftains as they approach the assembly. Among these chieftains he names Þorkell Súrsson, whom the boys kill in revenge for the death of their father Vésteinn. Thus the function of the vagrant in this saga is that of the gossip – the person whose careless talk costs the life of another saga character. It is noticeable that Hallbjörn does not benefit from this exchange, indeed he loses out as his booth is ransacked by men looking for the killers.

Nevertheless such examples of vagrants inadvertently giving away information are relatively rare. It is much more common for the vagrant to attempt to use his position on the fringe of society to his own advantage and that is what we find in the case of *Þórðar saga hreðu*. In ch. 9, Þórðr is staying with his friend, the cowardly Þórhallr. Þórðr announces a plan to visit his favourite horse, but Þórhallr persuades him to delay his trip for three days so they might gather hay at the same time (following which there is a sharp exchange between Þórhallr and his wife, regarding his lack of bravery).



Skildu þau nú talit. Við tal þeirra var staddr einn umrenningr. Hann kastar fótum undir sik ok kemr um kveldit til Þverár. Özurr spurði hann tíðinda eða hvaðan hann væri at kominn. Hann kveðst engi kunna tíðindi at segja, - “en á Miklabæ í Óslandshlíð var ek í nátt.” Özurr segir: “Hvat hafðist Þórðr hreða at, kappinn?” Sveinninn segir: “Víst máttu þat til segja, at hann sé kappi, svá sneypiliga sem þú hefir fyrir honum farit; en ekki sá [ek] hann gera, utan hann hnauð hugró á sverði sínu. En þat heyrða ek Þórhallr segja, at þeir mundi færa hey ór görðum innan þriggja nátta.” Özurr segir: “Hversu margmennir mundu þeir vera?” Sveinninn svarar: “Eigi fleiri en Þórðr ok Eyvindr ok Þórhallr.” “Vel segir þú, sveinn,” segir Özurr. Síðan kvaddi hann til ferðar með sér tólf menn ok reið út í Óslandshlíð.⁹

[Now their [Þórhallr and his wife’s] conversation ended. A vagrant was stood near to their conversation. He took to his heels and came to Þverá during the evening. Özurr asked him for news and where he had come from. He said that he had no news to tell “but I was at Miklabær in Óslandshlíð last night.” Özurr said: “What was the champion Þórðr hreða doing?” The lad said: “Certainly, you might say that, that he is a champion, since you have suffered such disgrace from him. But I saw him do nothing, other than he riveted a sword-clinch on his sword. But I heard this, Þórhallr said that they would fetch hay from the yard within three nights.” Özurr said: “How many men will they be.” The lad answered: “No more than Þórðr, Eyvindr and Þórhallr.” “Well spoken lad,” said Özurr. Then he summoned twelve men to accompany him and rode out to Óslandshlíð.]

Having acquired this information about Þórðr’s travelling plans, Özurr attacks Þórðr and loses his own life in the process.

As the vagrant (in this case described as an *umrenningr*) is not officially attached to Þórhallr’s farm, he is able to move between the two farms taking news. Despite the conflict between the social groups, the vagrant is welcome in both houses. In the course of general conversation in his first location, the vagrant overhears information that he knows will be of use elsewhere. Several things in the scene are implicit. Firstly, it is implied that the vagrant is already aware of the dispute between Þórðr and Özurr. He is thus able to initiate the action himself. He leaves his comfortable place in Miklabær, expressly for the purpose of going to Þverá. Secondly, it is implicit that a financial transaction takes place between Özurr and the vagrant. That a financial transaction takes place seems inevitable if we compare the scene to two similar incidents in *Njáls saga*. In ch. 44 some travelling women (*farandkonur*) say that they think that Bergþóra will reward them for informing her of the slander made against her sons.¹⁰ We are not told whether this is the case, but assume it to be so. Later, in ch. 92, some beggar women (*snauðar konur*) are helped over a river by Þráinn Sigfússon.¹¹ They repay this good turn with bad; by immediately informing Bergþóra of his whereabouts and this time we are



told that they are rewarded with gifts. Returning to *Þórðar saga*, that a financial transaction has taken place is implied by the conversation between Özurr and the vagrant. One might expect a vagrant to approach his potential host with respect, even obsequiousness, but this is not what happens. As soon as the vagrant enters the farm at Þverá he is asked for news. He is reticent at first, in fact claiming that he knows no news, but mentioning that he has previously been to Miklabær. Özurr takes this bait. He is unable to let the mention of Miklabær pass without sarcastically referring to Þórðr as a great champion. The vagrant says that he knows nothing of Þórðr being a champion other than the shame that he has heaped upon Özurr. It seems that the vagrant realises that the only way he is going to get paid is if his information is used. Therefore he is goading Özurr, provoking him to attack Þórðr, thus using the information that he is supplying, thus paying him. This conversation clearly demonstrates the place of the vagrant within saga society. Despite being a fringe character, he is invited into the farm expressly for the purpose of obtaining news. Furthermore the vagrant realises the strength of his position and the value of the information he possesses. This is the most common function of the vagrant within the *Íslendinga sögur*: that of the peddler of report. He uses his lack of social bonds and his ability to travel between rival social groups. He obtains information in one social group that will be of interest to another, and then sells it.

We can find a number of other examples of such characters selling information. In *Droplaugarsona saga*, a hawker informs Droplaug of the slander made against her by Þorgrímr torðýfill.¹² In *Hænsa-Þóris saga* a *reikanarmaðr* reveals to Þórir (himself a former hawker) that Þorvaldr Tungu-Oddsson is lodging with Arngrímr goði.¹³ In *Reykðæla saga* two *göngukonur* take news of Steingrímur's purchase of oxen to Vémundur.¹⁴ In these examples the content of the information is very different, yet in all cases there is the strong implication of a financial transaction having taken place and in all cases the vagrants realise the value of the information which they have obtained and travel to the various buyers expressly to try and sell it.

Yet if it is possible to sell genuine information, it is also possible for a vagrant to make money by spreading false information, spreading slander. In *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallsonar*, Þórhaddr Hafjlótsson pays a *flokkunarmaðr* to put about an untrue rumour about his enemy Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallson:



Einn aptan kom þar maðr til gistingar, sá er Grímkell hét. Hann var flökkunarmaðr ok hrópstunga mikil. Þórhaddr gerði sér tíðhjalat við hann, ok dvalðisk hann þar um hríð. Þórhaddr kaupir at honum, at hann skal fara á vestanvert land ok bera þar upp ragmæli um Þorstein Hallsson með því móti, at Þorsteinn væri kona ina níundu hverja nótt ok ætti þá viðskipti við karlmenn. Ok yfir þessa flugu gein Grímkell ok fór yfir landit vestr ok hrópaði Þorstein, ok fór síðan svá vestan yfir ragmælit. Þetta kom svá, at ragmælit fór nær í hvers manns hús, ok lögðu óvinir Þorsteins á hann óvirðing mikla hér fyrir, en vinir hans hǫrmuðu.¹⁵

[One evening a man who was called Grímkell came there for night lodgings. He was a vagrant and a great slanderer. Þórhaddr often spoke with him and he remained there a while. Þórhaddr made a deal with him, that he should go to the west country and make there a slanderous rumour about Þorsteinn Hallsson with this sense, that Þorsteinn was a woman every ninth night and at that time had intercourse with men. Grímkell swallowed this bait and went to the west country and slandered Þorsteinn and thus the slanderous rumour travelled across from the west. It so happened that the report went to almost everyone's house, and Þorsteinn's enemies heaped shame on him because of it, and his friends grieved.]

This rumour is of course familiar to us from *Njáls saga* a text which it is probable the author knew. Again we find a financial transaction taking place between a vagrant and a farmer, between a fringe character and an established member of society. However, whereas the sale of news is usually been initiated by the vagrant, the slander here is initiated by the farmer. Again we see having the ability to move around the countryside is used to the vagrant's advantage. Grímkell is told to go west to start the slander, so that it spreads back from there to Þorsteinn's locality. Not only does this make it more difficult for Þorsteinn to prosecute Þórhaddr for slander (though there is little doubt in his mind as to the origin of the rumour), it also makes the rumour more damaging, as people do not immediately connect it with Þórhaddr. By the time the rumour has spread back to Þorsteinn, the damage had already been done, as so many people are aware of it.

There is a similar example of a vagrant spreading an untrue story in *Víga-Glúms saga*. Halli pays a vagrant (an *einhleypingr*) to spread a relatively benign story about his sons and, as in *Þorsteins saga*, the vagrant is required to go elsewhere first to give the story additional credence.¹⁶ In *Kormáks saga*, Þorvaldr pays a tramp (a *gongusveinn*) to compose a rude verse about Steingerðr, his own wife, and then to pretend that her potential lover Kormákr composed it.¹⁷



My final example is interesting because it does not use the function of the vagrant as news-giver, however it does use his position on fringes of society. In *Harðar saga* the relationship between Torfi and his brother in law Grímkell has never been easy. Matters get worse when Grímkell's wife, Torfi's sister, dies during childbirth while staying with Torfi. Having already tried unsuccessfully to do away with the child through exposure, Torfi later hits upon the idea of fostering her upon a vagrant named Sigmundur.

Sigmundur hét maðr; hann gekk yfir á húsgang ok kona hans ok sonr, er Helgi hét. Optast váru þau í gestahúsi, þar sem þau kómu, nema Sigmundur væri inni til skemmtanar. Þetta it sama haust kómu þau Sigmundur til Breiðabólstaðar. Tók Torfi vel við þeim ok mælti til þeirra: “Ekki skulu þit í gestahúsi vera, því at mér lízt vel á þik, Sigmundur, ok heldr gæfusamliga.” Hann svarar: “Ekki mundi þér þat missýnast, þó at þat væri, at þér sýndist svá.” Torfi kveðst mundu gera sæmd til hans, - “því at ek mun þiggja at þér barnfóstr.” Sigmundur svarar: “Er okkar sá mannamunr, þó at ek fóstra þér barn, því at þat er talat, at sá sé minni maðr, er öðrum fóstrar barn.” Torfi mælti: “Þú skalt færa meyna til Ölfusvatns.” Þessu játar Sigmundur. Tekr hann nú við Þorbjörgu ok bindr hana á bak sér ok ferr á burt síðan. Þetta þóttist Torfi gera allt til svívirdingar við Grímkel, en þótti þessi maðr vel fallinn til at bera meyna á rekning; vildi hann ok ekki hætta hér betra manni til en Sigmundi, því at honum þótti engis örvænt fyrir Grímkatli, ef sá maðr hefði fært honum barnit, at honum hefði nökkur hefnd í þótt.¹⁸

[A man was named Sigmundur. He went begging from house to house with his wife and his son, who was called Helgi. Most often they were in the guest building, at that place where they were staying, unless Sigmundur was inside as amusement. Torfi received them well and said to them: “You both shall not be in the guest building, because you seem pleasing to me and somewhat lucky, Sigmundur.” He answered: “You would not be mistaken, if it seemed that way to you.” Torfi said that he would do him an honour, - “because I will accept child-fostering from you.” Sigmundur answered: “There is a difference in status between us, although I foster a child from you, because it is said that he is the lesser man, who fosters the other's child.” Torfi said: “You shall take the maid to Ölfusvatn.” Sigmundur agreed to this. He now received Þorbjörg and bound her on his back and then went away. Torfi reckoned to do this entirely to shame Grímkell, and thought this man was well suited to carry a maid in vagrancy. He also did not want to venture a better man than Sigmundur in this, because if that man brought the child to him, it seemed in no way beyond expectation for Grímkell to consider some kind of revenge.]

Leaving a young female child in the care of a man on the very edge of social acceptability must have seemed horrific to the members of Torfi's household and to the original readership of the saga. Yet there is also much in the scene that is humorous; in particular the conversation between Torfi and Sigmundur, in which Sigmundur claims that the fosterage demonstrates the



difference in their standing as the fosterer was always considered the lower man. This notion appears in a number of other places in the *Íslendinga sögur*, among them ch. 27 of *Laxdæla saga*, where Óláfr pái offers to foster the son of his half-brother Þorleikr.¹⁹ In *Laxdæla saga* the scene is important because it brings together the foster-brothers Kjartan and Bolli for the first time. Furthermore it demonstrates the tremendous humility of Óláfr. Everything which the saga tells us about the two half-brothers indicates that, despite his illegitimacy, Óláfr is considered the greater man in social standing, renown and accomplishments, yet here he is willing to be seen by society as the lesser man, in order to secure a bond with his half-brother. However in *Harðar saga* the notion is ironic. It would have been only too apparent, both to the assembled members of Torfi's household and to the original readership that the vagrant is the lesser man. In fact merely by comparing himself to Torfi, the vagrant is seeking to raise his position in society. As the vagrant is moved from the fringes, towards the centre of society, he tries to imitate the discourse of that society, by emulating what he considers to be the way in which its members speak. However, while the nameless vagrant in *Þórðar saga* was in complete control of his conversation with Özurr, Sigmundur in *Harðar saga* is a pawn being used by Torfi, and thus his attempts at fitting in are somewhat pathetic.

Although the person receiving the child in fosterage was considered socially lower than he who offered the child, he might still expect to benefit from the association, from the new social bond that he has made. This is indeed the case in *Harðar saga*, as we are told that Sigmundur takes the long road round to Grímkell's farm at Ölfusvatn and is offered hospitality all along the way on account of his new connection. Upon arriving at Ölfusvatn there follows a further humorous scene in which Sigmundur expects to be received into society and even introduces himself as Grímkell's foster relative (*barnfóstri*). Grímkell is suitably horrified at his new social bond. He recognises the plot for what it is, an attempt on the part of Torfi's to enter him into a familial bond with the lowly Sigmundur, an ignominious and potentially dangerous relationship. Grímkell refuses to accept the child and drives Sigmundur away. Matters have taken a turn against Sigmundur. He has not benefited from the fosterage in the way he had hoped, and he is once more back on the social fringe and now with an extra mouth to feed. This scene plays with the position of the vagrant within society; the potential danger as he is moved to centre and offered social bonds and the reaction of saga society and saga readership towards the vagrant, resulting in his being placed firmly back in his position on the fringe.



In conclusion we find a certain discrepancy between the law and the sagas. In particular, the law says that it is illegal to feed and house vagrants, whereas saga characters always seem to do so. This discrepancy should probably not concern us too much. Maybe the social function of the vagrant as news-giver overrode the letter of the law (some aspects of which may never have been strictly enforced). It maybe that concepts of hospitality towards strangers, such as those expressed in *Hávamál* 135, were so strong as to make the law irrelevant. Or perhaps merely the requirements of the narrative overrode any necessity for the author to make it legally accurate. What the law and the sagas both agree upon, is that vagrants are a potential menace. They are a disruptive element within saga society. In three of the four examples given above, the actions of the vagrant, whether intentional or not, lead directly to the death of a saga character. Yet while vagrants endeavour to take advantage of their place on the fringes of saga society, it is a society that is only too eager to take advantage of them. Narrators make explicit their condemnation of perverse vagrants, but they often leave implicit their condemnation of characters who pay vagrants for news, or to spread malicious slander, or in the case of the final example even place a young female relative in danger merely to shame a rival.

NOTES

¹ Grágás: Konungsbók. (II): 28 (normalised).

² Dennis et al., 2000: 52.

³ Grágás: Konungsbók. (I): 225.

⁴ Grágás: Konungsbók. (II): 48-49.

⁵ Grágás: Konungsbók. (II): 203.

⁶ Grágás: Konungsbók. (II): 179.

⁷ Vestfirðinga sögur (Ch. 28): 89.

⁸ Grágás: Konungsbók. (II): 14.

⁹ Kjalnesinga saga. (Ch. 9): 208-209.



- ¹⁰ Brennu-Njáls saga. (Ch. 44): 114.
- ¹¹ Brennu-Njáls saga. (Ch. 92): 230-231.
- ¹² Austfirðinga sögur. (Ch. 3): 144-145.
- ¹³ Borgfirðinga sögur. (Ch. 7): 19.
- ¹⁴ Ljósvetninga saga. Ch. 11, p. 177.
- ¹⁵ Austfirðinga sögur. (Ch. 3): 307-308.
- ¹⁶ Eyfirðinga sögur. (Ch. 18): 62-63.
- ¹⁷ Vatnsdæla saga. (Ch. 20): 277-278.
- ¹⁸ Harðar saga. (Ch. 9): 22-23.
- ¹⁹ Laxdæla saga. (Ch. 27): 75.

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