Animal-Human Relationships:

Life on the Farmsteads of Medieval Iceland

Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs í Medieval Icelandic Studies

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on animal-human relationships in medieval Iceland, particularly focusing on the landnám and Icelandic Commonwealth. Animal-human relationships, due to the inherent diversity of such a topic, are organized into three categories of analysis: practical, emotional, and sociocultural. Practical relationships are those which focus on providing a service or product to humans. These are, typically, frequent and straightforward interactions that form the foundation for other relationships. Emotional relationships are emotional connections developed through interactions with animals. Companionship, empathy, and the personification of farm animals are some of the ways in which emotional relationships can manifest in the historical record. Sociocultural relationships are the ways in which animals affect interpersonal relationships, culture, and society. Just as the actions of humans can affect relationship dynamics between other humans, the presence and actions of animals can affect the interpersonal dynamics within human society.

This thesis proposes that medieval Icelandic society was pervaded by and was inseparable from farm animals. The role of domesticates went beyond just a means for subsistence. Domesticated farm animals became an integral part of the Icelandic lifestyle and identity. The effects were so pervasive that Icelanders judged themselves, as well as each other, based on their interactions with animals. In order to demonstrate these claims, this paper examines various Íslendingasögur, laws from Grágás, archaeological material, and secondary sources.
Introduction

This thesis aims to examine how domesticated animals and humans interacted with one another on medieval Icelandic farmsteads, with a focus on the Icelandic Commonwealth. Icelandic society was still significantly isolated during the Commonwealth. While there were influences from and contact with mainland Europe during the Icelandic Commonwealth, the geographic isolation of Icelanders made subsistence agriculture the primary survival mechanism for most Icelanders (Byock 2001: 28). The settling population of Iceland needed to exploit both wild and domesticated animals in order to live in such a difficult environment. Animal exploitation became more focused on domesticated animals when farmsteads grew larger and became better established (Byock 2001: 46-47). Over time, isolation and necessity caused the mechanisms of domesticated animal exploitation to become more complex, developing into multifaceted relationships rooted in a unique Icelandic culture.

Animal-human relationships are situational and deeply affected by cultural context. Medieval Icelandic culture was heavily integrated with domesticated animals, forming many types of animal-human relationships. There were practical relationships focused on the maintenance of society, producing goods, performing labor, and feeding people; there were emotional relationships which affected the moods and quality of life of both people and animals; and there were also sociocultural relationships, in which animals affected interpersonal relationships as well as the structure of Icelandic society. Icelanders drafted laws, created sports, and wrote stories while overtly and consciously influenced by their life alongside animals.

I intend to compile and analyze a wide variety of animal-human relationships by organizing these historical relationships in the previously mentioned three categories: practical, emotional, and sociocultural. The complicated nature of relationships between two living entities means that
many relationships will have aspects of two or even all three categories. The sheer amount of literary and archaeological data necessitates an organizational strategy to approach this study. This system provides a reference point to recognize similarities and organize analysis. Another benefit of this approach is that it openly acknowledges the reciprocal nature of animal-human interactions. This allows for greater engagement with the lived experiences of animals, rather than just focusing on human perspectives and feelings. This is done under the belief that the experiences of domesticated animals in the past also contributed to the history of Iceland and are therefore independently valuable. Historical domesticated animals were conscious actors capable of affecting one another as well as the humans around them. As such, domesticates were able to directly affect and influence the development of Icelandic society alongside their human partners.

The effects of domesticated animals were initially constrained by the resources available to the settling population as well as what could have been brought to Iceland’s remote location throughout the Icelandic Commonwealth. Settlers would only have been able to bring what would fit on their ship. Bringing animals on the boats would have necessitated bringing food for those animals, cutting down on storage space even further. This meant that settlers had to be very conscious of the quantity, quality, and diversity of their stored animal resources. The suite of domesticated animals brought to Iceland was also limited by what was available in Europe prior to settlement. These constraints resulted in settlers bringing cattle, horses, sheep, goats, dogs, cats, and pigs to Iceland. The presence of these animals differed between farms and changed over time due to differences in climate, farming techniques, economics, and culture.

The initial settlers of Iceland were culturally diverse. The female population was composed of Gaelic and Scandinavian ancestry and most of the males were of Scandinavian descent (Agnar Helgason et al. 2000; Agnar Helgason et al. 2001). These two groups would have had different
cultural beliefs and knowledge of farming. Additionally, there was significant diversity in farming techniques within the Gaelic and Scandinavian genetic groupings. Farming techniques are heavily influenced by local culture. This is due to the strong effects that technology, landscape, climate, lived experience, and economics have on farming practices (Byock 2001: 33, 36-37, 44). I focused my background research primarily on Scandinavian animal husbandry influences rather than Gaelic influence. This was done due to the greater cultural influence exerted by the Scandinavian male settlers. The patriarchal cultural systems present among Icelandic settlers likely caused Scandinavian males to have a more direct impact on the majority of farmstead operations (Byock 2001: 48; Winroth 2016:161, 165). However, future research into Gaelic animal husbandry methods could provide additional insights into medieval Icelandic animal-human relations, particularly regarding domains where Icelandic gender norms favored direct control by women: dairying, wool processing, foodways, child rearing, etc.
Preceding Factors of Icelandic Animal Husbandry

Establishing the factors which contributed to the medieval Icelandic lifeway is critical to better understand the Icelandic cultural context. As such, it is necessary to discuss the people who became the settlers of Iceland. The question of who settled Iceland and when was under significant contention prior to the development of DNA research. DNA analysis on the remains of medieval Icelanders has connected the heritage of Iceland to Scandinavians and Gaels. The genetic evidence further suggests that the Icelandic settling population was not evenly split between Scandinavians and Gaels. Rather, most of the male population was of Scandinavian descent and the female population was more evenly split between Scandinavian and Gaelic peoples (Agnar Helgason et al. 2000: 714; Agnar Helgason et al. 2001: 731; Agnar Helgason et al. 2009).

Large-scale admixture between societies has often been associated with cultural transmission. The peopling of Iceland is no exception. However, Scandinavian culture likely had a larger impact due to male Scandinavians occupying socially significant positions. The majority of male settlers were of Scandinavian descent and approximately half of female settlers were of Scandinavian descent (Agnar Helgason et al. 2001: 731). In the cultural context of the landnám and medieval Iceland, males often possessed more privileges and social capital than their female counterparts. While females in Viking Age Scandinavian culture possessed more privileges than males in specific contexts, it is likely that the majority of Scandinavian females possessed fewer privileges than their male counterparts during the landnám. This was made possible due to male control of violence and the overall patriarchal structure of the settling population (Rafffield et al. 2017: 166, 189, 198). These cultural traits would have allowed the more numerous Scandinavian males to have greater control and influence over cultural traditions such as animal husbandry and food production. There are certainly farmstead contexts where women exerted more influence than
men over the development of Icelandic agricultural practice. For example, Viking Age Scandinavian women typically performed the milking and processing of dairy while men were taking care of other things around the farm (Byock 2001: 48; Winroth 2014: 168). The culture of Viking Age Scandinavian farmsteads resulted in a settling population where women had significant control over specific aspects of agriculture, but the overall state of gender relations made Scandinavian males more influential in agricultural contexts.

Analyzing animal-human relations in Scandinavia prior to the landnám reveals factors that formed the basis of medieval Icelandic agriculture. The establishment and growth of agriculture in Scandinavia can be traced to 4000 BCE (Malmer 2002). During this period, there were distinct groups in Scandinavia who survived either through foraging or agriculture. DNA evidence suggests that these groups were originally genetically distinct (Skoglund et al. 2014: 747). It is important to acknowledge that the cultural landscape of Scandinavia is not the sole result of the early agriculturalists. Genetic evidence suggests that, over time, foraging and farming populations interbred (Skoglund et al. 2014: 749). The hunter-gatherer Ertebølle were a material culture from southern Scandinavia and northern Germany dating to the late Mesolithic. This group survived and coexisted alongside agriculturalists moving into the area (Krause-Kyora et al. 2013: 2). Later cultures of the area are born from the intermixing of the Ertebølle and agriculturalist societies. Admixture and cultural transmission between the foraging and farming populations of Scandinavia contributed to the roots of the Scandinavian agriculture and animal husbandry. The cultural transmission occurring in ancient Scandinavia resulted in a society that had robust foodways which included maritime, hunted, foraged, and domesticated resources. It is no coincidence that the domesticated animals of Stone Age Scandinavia are the same ones that would arrive in Iceland thousands of years later.
Ancient domestication processes involved thousands of actors working over an extended period of time. Therefore, domesticating animals is more of an expression of group desire than individual desire. This holds true for the widespread adoption and usage of specific animals. Accepting and utilizing animals domesticated abroad can be understood as representative of a society’s lived reality and values. Stone Age Scandinavia is a context where animals were domesticated locally and also brought from abroad.

Mesolithic archaeological sites on Zealand and Jutland, dating to between 7000 BCE and 5000 BCE, have produced pig remains that are in an intermediate stage of domestication (Rowley-Conwy and Dobney 2008: 137). At this time Zealand was still connected via a land bridge to Jutland and Sweden. Therefore, Mesolithic southern Scandinavians were likely interacting with the peoples of continental Europe and southern Sweden. Archaeological evidence from sites throughout southern Scandinavia and Northern Europe supports this claim. Agriculturalist material culture spread from the south to the north into Scandinavia over a period of roughly seven hundred years (Krause-Kyora et al. 2013: 3). During that period of time the hunter-gatherer Ertebølle culture coexisted with agriculturalists. Sites occupied by hunter-gatherers were actively keeping domesticated pigs due to exchanges with their neighbors (Krause-Kyora et al. 2013: 5).

By the Neolithic period, which ranges from 5000 BCE to 2000 BCE in Scandinavia, sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs were deeply integrated into Scandinavian agricultural production schemes (Rowley-Conwy 2004: S83). Sheep and goats have no wild progenitors in Scandinavia, so there could not have been a local domestication event. While sheep and goats were certainly imported to Scandinavia, the manner of cattle and pig domestication in Scandinavia is still debated. While some evidence suggests that local domestication of cattle and pigs took place, it is equally possible that domesticates from other parts of Europe were repeatedly introduced to Scandinavia.
throughout the domestication process (Krause-Kyora et al. 2013: 2). Regardless of the specific origin, the mobile hunter-gatherer lifestyle had been replaced by a sedentary lifestyle partially dependent on interacting with a suite of domesticated animals: sheep, goats, pigs, and cattle.

Scandinavia had heartily embraced animal husbandry by the start of the Viking Age. The domesticated animals present in Neolithic southern Scandinavia had spread throughout the rest of the region. One of the most discussed animals in the study of Viking Age Scandinavian culture is the horse. Horses were present in Sweden as early as 6700 BCE (Sommer et al. 2011: 808). However, the horse remains which dated to 6900-6700 BCE were from wild horses. The indigenous horse population went extinct after the Scandinavian land bridge had been submerged (Sommer et al. 2011:810). Palynological data suggests that horses returned to Scandinavia by 3800 BCE after the Baltic Sea had caused forests to turn into grasslands (Sommer et al. 2011:810). These dates make it likely that wild horses returned to Scandinavia naturally. Domesticated horses were introduced afterwards and likely bred with the wild population to form the Scandinavian horse population. It is possible that the reintroduction of horses after other domesticates had become more common in Scandinavia contributed to the horse’s heightened cultural significance.

It is important not to assume direct continuity of culture and heritage when analyzing a specific geographic boundary over extended periods of time. Although the roots of many later Scandinavian trends appear to arise in the Mesolithic and Neolithic, it may not be the case. An example of this would be the frequent debate over the genetic relationship between Neolithic and later Scandinavians. Some research has proposed that there was a major population turnover event in Scandinavia which severs continuity between the Neolithic, Viking Age, and contemporary population (Malmström 2009). More recent research by the same analysts stated that it is equally possible that there is continuity between Neolithic and extant Scandinavians if significant
admixture occurred (Malmström et al. 2015: 8). In this case, this thesis is operating under the assumption that there is continuity with significant admixture. This explanation would account for the continuity of domesticated animal resources in Scandinavia while also providing more evidence for the later growth of continental European animal husbandry methodologies in Scandinavia. Regardless, the pre-Viking Age history of Scandinavia demonstrates the viability, success, and spread of domesticated animals in this region. The lifeways and foodways which enabled survival in the Scandinavian environment contributed towards animal husbandry techniques in later periods even if there is a lack of genetic continuity.

By the start of the Viking Age, 793 CE, agriculture had become the most common subsistence modality for non-Sámi Scandinavians (Winroth 2014: 170). The Scandinavian agricultural model followed the typical European model by jointly utilizing domesticated plant and animal resources. Maritime resources or foraged goods could also be included in the farmers’ diet depending on the specific environmental context of the farmstead (Winroth 2014: 179). Archaeological evidence from Viking Age farmsteads demonstrated the presence of cats and dogs as well as the suite of animals seen in earlier periods: pigs, cattle, horses, goats, and sheep (Hatting 1990).

Pigs were present on many Scandinavian farmsteads in the early Viking Age (Winroth 2014: 171). One of the main benefits of pigs is their ability to eat a variety of refuse and foraged material. The ability of pigs to eat many different foodstuffs is beneficial in a robust environment. Early Viking Age pig remains in Scandinavia have most frequently been found in the homes of the economic elite (Winroth 2014: 171). Cattle, sheep, and goats were also common on Viking-Age Scandinavian farmsteads. This was likely due to the fact that they provide additional secondary resources. All three are able to provide milk. Sheep and goats are also able to provide
wool for clothing in the colder northern climate. Cattle could also have been used to pull plows through fields in order to grow grains such as barley or rye (Winroth 2014: 169-170). Horses were primarily used for transportation or as draft animals, rather than as a meat source (Winroth 2014: 171). The availability of labor and secondary resources rendered slaughtering livestock for meat less efficient. Therefore, most farms did not typically slaughter livestock except in times of extreme need or due to social obligation (Winroth 2014: 171).

Viking Age Scandinavian farmsteads were actively run by both men and women working out of a central longhouse. The longhouse had been commonly used in Scandinavia for hundreds of years by the start of the Viking Age (Winroth 2014: 171). Men focused on labor conducted outside of the longhouse whereas women focused on processing dairy products or wool indoors (Winroth 2014: 168, 170). The production of milk, cheese, butter, and whey made women vital to the overall productivity of farmsteads. Additionally, the processing of wool into usable fabric was an essential aspect of life in the colder Scandinavian climate. However, richer farmsteads were able to acquire wool products through trade and were less likely to need the women to work on wool products (Winroth 2014: 167). Trade was possible due to the interconnectedness of Viking Age Scandinavia. It could have been possible for farmsteads to operate without much contact with the outside world. In fact, many farmsteads were located in geographically isolated locations (Winroth 2014: 175). However, farmsteads were often connected to one another through familial relations, social obligation, and economic ties (Winroth 2014: 175). These bonds ensured that even geographically isolated farmsteads were connected to a larger network of goods and information.

The people who settled Iceland during the landnám belonged to the culture of early Viking Age farmers. The settlers were economically average farmers who brought their foodways and lifestyle to a new land (Somerville and McDonald 2013: 53). It was necessary for the farmers to
bring their animals along with them to Iceland in order to survive. The Scandinavian suite of domesticated animals journeyed over a thousand kilometers to an environment that possessed no other large terrestrial mammals. Survival in the Icelandic environment, for both humans and animals, necessitated the adaptation of cultural traditions and agricultural practices.
Adapting to the Icelandic Environment

The period of initial Icelandic settlement is known as the landnám. While the exact timeline of settlement is often debated, the landnám is typically believed to take place from 870 CE to 930 CE (Smith 1995: 319). By 930 CE the island was either fully settled or at least most of the land was claimed (Smith 1995: 320). Iceland was uninhabited just prior to the landnám, although there may have been some Irish monks previously present on the island (Kristján Ahronson 2000: 117). Regardless of whether the Irish monks were present or not, there was no large-scale settlement, agriculture, or material culture present in Iceland prior to the landnám. Upon arrival in Iceland the settlers were initially greeted by a landscape not too dissimilar from their homeland of Scandinavia. The island possessed numerous fjords, rivers, mountains, and forests (Smith 1995: 320; Margrét Hallsdóttir 1987). The Icelandic coastline offered access to rich fisheries and bird nesting sites (Smith 1995: 329). This environment appeared to be optimal for the Scandinavian lifestyle. As such, many settlers arrived in Iceland with animals that they brought from home. However, settlers may not have been prepared for the significant differences between the Scandinavian and Icelandic environments.

Uprooting an entire farmstead is an inherently difficult task. That task is made even more difficult when there are major ecological differences. One such difference was the absence of land mammals. The only land mammal present in Iceland at the time of settlement was the arctic fox (Smith 1995: 323). While there were bird colonies present during the landnám, almost all of the bird species migrated out of Iceland during the winter (Smith 1995: 323). The overall ecological conditions of Iceland made subsistence through a hunter-gatherer modality unsustainable (Smith 1995: 324). Although Scandinavian settlers were deeply entrenched in an agricultural lifestyle, it would have taken time to establish productive farmland and grow the size of animal herds.
Therefore, alternative foodways would have been necessary in order to maintain a food stockpile during and briefly after the transition period (Byock 2001: 51). Notably, Icelandic ship production was significantly hindered by the lack of sufficient quality wood. Over time there would have been an inadequate quantity of seagoing vessels to sustain the Icelandic population solely through maritime resources (Byock 2001: 46). Difficulties in accessing maritime food sources during the winter might have contributed to the eradication of seal and walrus colonies. Settlers may have overharvested the beachside colonies due to a lack of easily available maritime alternatives (Smith 1995: 323). It is possible that for some early settlers the inviting prospect of a new farmstead rapidly became a risky endeavor where food security was a frequent concern. Medieval Icelandic literature contains explicit mentions of periods where food was scarce and life was difficult.

“þann tíma kom hallæri svá mikit á Ísland, at ekki hefir jafnmikit komit;” (Gr, in Íslenzk Fornrit VII: 28).

“At that time a famine descended on Iceland. It was so devastating that its like has never again been experienced,” (Gr, trans. in Byock 2009: 27).

The specific incident mentioned in Grettis saga could be hyperbole, but the fear of such a famine was still clearly present in the medieval Icelandic mindset. A cultural fear of famine could have been caused by difficulties encountered during the landnám. The lack of easily accessible food during settlement may have had an increased effect on settler foodways and culture due to conflicts between some settlers’ preconceived notions of agriculture and their environmental reality.

Scandinavian farmsteads had significant diversity in the order of construction, style, and layout of the farm itself. This trend was also present in how settlers established Icelandic farmsteads (Smith 1995: 328). The settlers of Iceland acted mostly independently from one another. There was not a unified force or governing body which was responsible for organizing
the settlement of Iceland. This resulted in independent families or individuals rushing to claim ownership of land in a previously unoccupied territory. The primary evidence for settlement diversity is in the different buildings present on each farmstead. One would expect that most experienced farmers from the same culture, especially when confronted with a new and difficult environment, would follow a generally preferred or ideal style of farmstead if one existed. However, early Icelandic farmsteads were very diverse in their structure and style. While all included longhouses as a central structure, there was substantial variation in outbuildings, architectural style, farm layout, and resource management (Smith 1995: 328-329). The diversity of Icelandic farmsteads likely ensured that some of the settlers had successful farmsteads. However, it is probable that some farms experienced the inverse, as the structures and layout of their farmsteads were not optimal to deal with the realities of Iceland. Farmers were likely doing their best to figure out what the most efficient and viable practices were. The experimental nature of Icelandic settlement could have put some farmers in situations where their practices actively made settling Iceland more difficult.

Although early Icelandic farmsteads were certainly diverse, archaeofaunal evidence has revealed some overall trends in the initial settlement approach. The early settlement of Iceland featured the introduction of pigs and cattle (Smith 1995: 329). Pigs and cattle were very valuable domestic animals in Viking Age Scandinavia (Winroth 2014). Travelling by boat across the Atlantic Ocean from Scandinavia to Iceland likely caused some settlers to leave behind livestock. It is only natural to choose to bring the more valuable livestock rather than less valuable livestock. This trend would not last long, with pigs being phased out almost completely from the typical Icelandic farmstead shortly after the landnám ended (Smith 1995: 329). The aggressive foraging habits of pigs may have inhibited the regrowth of Icelandic pastures and undergrowth. The ability
of pigs to eat a wide variety of foodstuffs was beneficial in Scandinavia and massively detrimental in Iceland. Large groups of pigs could have rendered a grazing space unusable for a period of time. This would have made establishing new farmsteads more difficult. Farmsteads that did not have large pig populations, or even had no pigs at all, would likely have been more successful in the Icelandic environment than farms which had many pigs. The success differential in this scenario may have contributed towards pigs being phased out from most Icelandic farmsteads in favor of other domesticates such as sheep and cattle (Byock 2001: 47; Zori et al. 2013: 158-159).

Evidence suggests that early Icelandic settlers burned large amounts of forest. This was likely done to produce charcoal, gather wood for construction, and to clear land for pastures, farming plots, and buildings (Smith 1995: 334-336). Clearing forests in Scandinavia was not a major issue for Viking Age inhabitants. Scandinavian forests tended to regrow, and Scandinavian farmers had access to trade networks to procure foreign wood if necessary. Forests in Iceland did not regrow as they did in Scandinavia. It is possible that the rapid pace of settlement, burning events, and animal grazing consumed forests at a faster rate than they could regrow (Smith 1995: 336). The isolation of Iceland made buying foreign wood much more difficult than it would have been in Scandinavia. Deforestation also meant that ships could not be constructed in Iceland, further exacerbating their isolation. The isolation from continental Europe contributed to intra-connectedness, need for self-sufficiency, and emphasis on local community in Iceland (Byock 2001: 44; Smith 1995: 337).
Animal-Human Relationships

It may be tempting to focus on human agency and experiences as the sole and primary driver of animal husbandry. However, this mindset can ignore or marginalize how animal experiences, behaviors, traits, and personalities can affect individual humans and overall culture. Interactions between humans and domesticated animals are not monodirectional. It is more analytically beneficial to approach animal-human interactions as a relationship which is similar to interhuman interactions. Each party has the ability to affect one another and influence how the overall relationship develops. This happens over long periods of time for domesticates. The original relationship with wild predecessors, the thousands of human and animal actors involved during the domestication process, and the evolving interactions between contemporary humans and animals all contribute to animal-human relationships in their specific context. The result is that there is a huge amount of information and experiences which contribute to how different animals and humans behave towards one another in various contexts.

Approaching an enormous quantity of data without a categorization method is difficult. Thus, this paper has organized archaeological and literary data into three categories: practical relationships, emotional relationships, and sociocultural relationships. It is important to acknowledge that animal-human relationships can be complicated and multifaceted just like human-human relationships. There is going to be overlap between categories and some animal-human relationships may belong to multiple categories at the same time.

The first and most straightforward category of animal-human relationships is practical. This category features humans interacting with animals to create tangible, direct benefits for humans. These types of relationships are inherently human-centric. The intention of a practical relationship is to benefit humans, often through the production of materials meant for human
consumption or use. Practical relationships also inherently focus on the bodies of animals and humans. Any instance where humans use animals as resources to continue or improve human existence is a practical relationship. While some practical relationships may be exploitative, this is not always the case. Animals may also benefit from practical relationships; however, this may have been a side effect rather than a conscious consideration of the human actors.

The second category of animal-human relationships is emotional. This category embodies the emotional connections between animals and humans. Rather than focusing on tangible benefits, this category focuses on how animals and humans feel about one another. There are many ways in which an animal and human can have an emotional relationship. The inherent complexity and individuality of each example makes emotional relationships difficult to pin down. A traditional farmstead relationship could be that of a human master and animal servant. The humans do their best to control and direct the behaviors of an animal. This relationship could feature a limited emotional capacity, viewing animals as no different than tools. Alternatively, a farmer could be deeply appreciative of their animals and have affection for them. The medieval Icelandic literary corpus will be particularly useful in determining trends in the emotions of Icelanders towards animals, as well as how Icelanders perceived animal emotion.

The final category of animal-human relationships is sociocultural. This category does not focus on specific interactions between animals and humans. Instead, this category encompasses how animals affect inter-human relationships. Animals are able to affect human relationships due to their economic, social, emotional, or cultural value. For example, how many animals someone possesses can affect their social capital, and giving an animal as a gift could have different meanings based on context and that animal’s value. The importance of animals has led many societies to legislate, establish mores, and generally regulate how animals were meant to be treated.
This means that human-human relationships are inherently affected by integrating human society with domesticated animals. This then creates a reciprocal relationship as human society influences the fate of domesticates and domesticates influence the fate of human society. As such, it is possible to better understand the history of Iceland by exploring the sociocultural dynamics caused by domesticated animals living amongst humans.
Practical Relationships

Practical animal-human relationships were common on farmsteads in medieval Iceland. As stated previously, *landnám* Iceland was a difficult environment for settlers. This is especially true when compared to other contexts settled during the Viking Age. Regions such as Danelaw and continental Europe had previously been settled and retained significant connections to Scandinavia (Buckberry et al. 2014). Practical relationships with animals contributed to and enabled survival in the Icelandic environment. Engagement in practical relationships was pervasive enough to preserve evidence of those relationships in the Icelandic literary corpus and in material culture uncovered through archaeological excavations.

There are many forms that a practical animal-human relationship could take. The production of primary and secondary resources is one of the most straightforward types of practical relationships. Primary resources are materials that can harvested from an animal when it is slaughtered: bones, meat, ivory, cartilage, organs, etc. Secondary resources are materials that can be harvested from an animal that do not require killing the animal: wool, milk, dung, etc. Primary and secondary resources can be used for a variety of purposes, but a common and notable purpose is to create products for human consumption.

The farmsteads of Commonwealth Iceland survived through a combination of agriculture and exploiting nearby wild resources. While wild resources were used throughout Icelandic history, agriculture became the main subsistence modality during the Icelandic Commonwealth (Byock 2001: 50). Icelandic agriculture was a primarily animal-based model. Farmers possessed a distribution of cattle, goats, sheep, and horses on their farms (Byock 2001: 47-48; Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir et al. 2007: 201). The presence and ratio of each animal differed between farms, but the overall model was similar (Byock 2001: 46 – 52; Clayton and McGovern 2001; Guðrún...
Sveinbjarnardóttir et al. 2007). Some farms may also have had a variety of other animals present. One example from the literature would be the keeping of geese in *Grettis saga*.

“This Síðan tók Grettir við heimgásunum; þær váru fimm tigir ok með kjúklingar margir.” (Gr, in *Íslenzk Fornrit VII*:37)

“So Grettir began to look after the geese. There were fifty of them, even more counting the young ones.” (Gr, trans. in Byock 2009: 34)

Archaeological evidence suggests that geese were not as common as mammal domesticates, but bird bones have been found on Icelandic farmsteads (Harrison 2010: 12). This example shows that medieval Icelandic farms could have engaged with animals beyond just the typical mammalian suite (Adalsteinsson 1981: 258). While Icelandic farmsteads most often relied on mammals, there was certainly space for engaging with a wide variety of other wild, semidomesticated, and domesticated animals.

Domesticated mammals provided most of the primary and secondary resources necessary for subsistence agriculture in Icelandic culture. Cattle, goats, and sheep provided farmers with a consistent source of milk. Notably, it would have been difficult for Icelandic farms to consistently produce a grain surplus due to the technology, culture, and environment available during the Commonwealth (Simpson et al. 2002: 439). Icelanders found a way to survive despite the environmental difficulty. The landscape of Commonwealth Iceland was used to produce a large enough quantity of fodder to sustain herds of domesticated animals through a combination of growing and foraging. Dairy animals provided Icelanders with a mechanism to effectively raise the food productive capacity of their fields.

Dairy products were staple food sources on Commonwealth farmsteads. While goats and sheep can be milked, cows were often the preferred dairy animal for medieval Icelanders (Byock
As stated previously, labor on farmsteads was highly gendered. Medieval literature, which likely worked to reinforce gender roles for its contemporary audience, provides evidence for the gendered nature of farm labor.

“Þá hafði Einarr nýrekit fé í kvíar. Hann lá á kvíagarðinum ok talði fé, en konur váru at mjólka.” (Hrafnk, in Íslenzk Fornrit XI: 104).

“Einar had just finished herding the sheep into the pen. He was lying on the wall of the pen, counting the sheep, and the women were milking.” (Hrafnk, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 442)

“Grettir svarar: ‘Þetta er kalt verk ok karlmannligt; en illt þykki mér at treysta merinni,’” (Gr, in Íslenzk Fornrit VII: 40).

“Grettir replied: ‘[Herding horses] is cold and manly work. But I do not like trusting the mare.’” (Gr, trans. in Byock 2009: 36).

Medieval Icelandic men would work in the field to produce animal feed and manage herds whereas women would do the milking and dairy processing (Byock 2001: 48; Winroth 2014: 168). Animal management took the cooperation of all household members to be maintained. Gendering labor, while restrictive and repressive in many instances, helped keep the farmstead organized and feed the household. Animals would be moved between locations depending on the time of year. Herds were able to graze in the shared highland pastures, called almenning, during the summer. No specific individual owned the almenning as they were for communal use. Animals could also have been allowed to freely graze if the landscape made them safe and easily accessible (Eg, in Attwood et al. 1997: 48; Laxd, in Attwood et al. 1997: 298; Vatn, in Attwood et al. 1997: 223). Animals that were intended for milking would be kept at a lower, more accessible area called a sel. A sel was privately owned or shared among neighbors and provided a safe, nearby space for
dairy processing (Byock 2001: 47). Dairy products would have been stored in the home along with other food. Large quantities of dairy and whey, enough to last through the winter or trade, could be kept in sacks or frozen (Gr, in Byock 2009: 82; Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 219).

Moving animals between locations, such as between the almenning and sel, would have taken many manhours. Farmers had to work throughout the day, finishing daily tasks and resolving problems as they arose. As such, it is likely that farmers were heavily incentivized to minimize travel time. In Hrafnkels saga, the shepherd Einarr needed to move quickly in order to find his employer’s missing sheep. He decides to take a horse to speed up his search. The description of his journey disregards Einarr’s skill as a rider completely, focusing entirely on the quality of the horse.

“Hann sér nú stóðhrossin fram á eyrunum ok hugsar at hóndla sér hross nókkurt til reiðar ok þottisk vita, at hann mundi fljótara yfir bera, ef hann riði held ren gengi. […] Hestrinn bar hann skjótt yfir ok víða, því at hestrinn var góðr af sér.” (Hrafnk, in Íslenzk Fornrit XI: 102-103).

“[Einar] then saw the horses on the gravel flats, and thought of catching a horse to ride, believing that he would travel faster if he rode rather than walked. […] [Freyfaxi] carried [Einar] fast and far, because he was a good horse.” (Hrafnk, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 441).

The above scenes focus on the core of the horse-human relationship. It is noteworthy that the sole quality which defines a good horse, in this context, is how quickly the horse can move over long distances. This form of idealized practicality continues throughout Hrafnkels saga. Another example would be when two individuals comment on how horses should be treated towards the end of the saga.

“These mares look ideal for farming people. I recommend that they be put to work for people as long as possible, until the winter or age start troubling them” (Hrafnk, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 455).

The stance of the above quote further demonstrates that efficiency and productivity are the primary concern of farmers in medieval Iceland. In the case of horses, reducing travel time while maximizing distance travelled allowed a farm to take advantage of large amounts of space without drastically increasing the strain on farmers. Worries regarding food security encouraged farmers to operate efficiently and maintain consistent, direct control over livestock. These factors constructed the organizational model which utilized horses as the main mode of transportation in medieval Iceland.

The popularity of horseback riding in medieval Iceland left a permanent mark on the landscape and literature. Horse paths can be found throughout Iceland. Horses were the primary means of connecting different farms and settlements throughout the island (Byock 2001: 46). Instances of horseback riding in Íslendingasögur depict a highly mobile society where individuals are able to swiftly travel from one farmstead to another via land.

“Þeir Þórarinn tók hesta þeira Þorbjarnar ok ríða þeim heim,” (Eb, in Íslenzk Fornrit IV: 37-38).

“Thorarin and his men took Thorbjorn’s horses and rode home.” (Eb, trans. in Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 53)

“Einn dag tók Einarr hest sinn ok reið á Aðalból.” (Hrafnk, in Íslenzk Fornrit XI: 101).
“One day, Einar took his horse and rode over to Adalbol.” (Hrafnk, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 440)

“Nú tekr hann hest sinn ok ríð yr í Aðalbol ok beðir Hrafnkel börta fyrir víg sonar síns.” (Hrafnk, in Íslenzk Fornrit XI: 105).

“Then he fetched his horse and rode to Adalbol and demanded compensation from Hrafnkell for the killing of his son.” (Hranfk, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 443)

On a smaller scale, medieval Icelandic farmers often had trails connecting all the different buildings on their personal farmsteads. Farms during the landnám were typically smaller and focused on self-sufficiency (Byock 2001: 31). However, over time many farms grew to a much larger size. Individual buildings and overall land usage were significantly larger during the mid-to-late Commonwealth (Byock 2001: 40, 47, 56).

“En um morguninn lét hann taka sér hest ok leggja á sǫðul ok ríð upp til sels.” (Hrafnk, in Íslenzk Fornrit XI: 104).

“In the morning [Hrafnkell] had a horse brought home to him, and ordered it to be saddled, and rode up to the dairy.” - (Hranfk, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 442)

The growth in traversable distance likely had a reciprocal relationship with horseback riding. The use of horses as a means of travel made the establishment of larger farmsteads more viable. Daily activities then reinforced the necessity and ubiquity of horse riding when farms and land use grew to a scale where travel by foot was more difficult.

Íslendingasögur also depict teens and children as having considerable riding skill.

“Ingimundr mælti: ‘Búið hest minn, ok vil ek til ríða.’ Hann var þá gamall ok nær blindr. Hafði hann ok þá af hónum látit Óll fjárforráð ok svá bú. Sveinn var honum fenginn til
fylgðar. Ingimundr var í blári kápu. Sveinninn leiddi hestinn undir honum;” (Vatn, in Íslensk Fornrit VIII: 60).

“‘Get my horse ready, and I will ride out there.’ He was by then old and almost blind. He had given up the management of his affairs and also the farm itself. A boy was found to attend him. Ingimund was wearing a black cape. The boy led him on horseback.” (Vatn, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 223)

“Hann gekk ór garði ok hitt i eykhest einn, er Skalla-Grímr átti, fór á bak ok reið eptir þeim Skalla-Grími;” (Eg, in Íslensk Fornrit II: 81).

“Egil went out of the farmyard and found one of Skallagrim’s pack-horses, mounted it and rode after him.” (Eg, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 51)

These scenes are exaggerated for narrative reasons. Ingimundr’s drive is shown by continuing to ride despite his age and condition. However, this scene still includes a young man to help him ride. Egill’s advanced skill and future are shown by his advanced skill in horse riding. While hyperbolic, these scenes make it seem that Icelandic children on the farmstead were encouraged to get comfortable with horses and begin developing their horse-riding abilities at a young age. A child’s productivity and quality of life would increase when that child became comfortable on horseback.

Horseback riding enabled farmers to venture long distances and manage their herds more efficiently. Widespread horse riding also allowed farmers to utilize larger amounts of farmland than would have been feasible when only traveling on foot. Traveling between the almenning, sel, and farmstead proper took time out of producing dairy and other resources. Traveling is inherently a resource expenditure, either in the form of calories or traveling materials. The spread out, multi-structure, and interconnected nature of Icelandic farmsteads would have been significantly more
difficult to manage without horse riding. Thus, it is possible the layout of larger medieval Icelandic farmsteads would have been impractical, inefficient, and unsustainable without horseback riding.

Unfortunately for farmers, animal husbandry is not as simple as just throwing food at cows and receiving milk in return. There are many factors which contribute to milk production. One of the main ones is pregnancy. Cattle must get pregnant in order to induce or continue milk production. Consistent pregnancy ensures consistent milk production. Farmers had to be conscious of the amount of fodder necessary to sustain many pregnancies, feed newborn cattle, and still make it through the winter and growing season. Evidence has shown that Icelandic farmers dealt with this issue by slaughtering calves. This is not an uncommon strategy. Zooarchaeological data from Commonwealth farms has shown that, typically, thirty to fifty percent of identified cattle bones are neonatal (Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir et al. 2007: 202). That is a substantial amount of cattle being killed each year. Farmers chose to do this because it was not efficient to raise every calf to maturity. Pregnancies were necessary to continue milk production but raising every newborn calf would have made the herd grow every single year. This level of growth would have been unsustainable and detrimental to the productivity of farmsteads. Raising every newborn calf would also have reduced the level of care provided for every animal on the farmstead. Slaughtering some calves enabled farmers to reduce the amount of fodder needed, continue milk production, maintain an adequate amount of care, and produce some additional primary materials: meat, bones, and hides. The meat and bones could be used for food and, during the later Commonwealth, the calf hides could have been used to produce vellum (Albína Hulda Pálsdóttir 2002:18; Quinn 2000: 38). This method, which focused on practicality and productivity, is the same as the previously described approach to horses: slaughtering them as they got old or too difficult to care for.
Although slaughtering calves was fairly common on Commonwealth farmsteads, it is likely that adult cattle would not have been killed very often. Cattle that survived to adulthood were intended for either milk production or labor. Oxen could be used to move loads around the farm or plow the fields (Winroth 2014: 170). The time and effort it took to raise cattle further disincentivized farmers from eating beef as a consistent meal (Byock 2001: 50). This does not mean that farmers did not eat beef. On the contrary, fresh beef was likely a seasonal meal. Every year the least productive cattle would be butchered to make room in the herd for the aging, unbutchered calves. Fresh beef would have been consumed, traded, or preserved for later use. This cycle helped optimize the productivity of the herd and enable life in medieval Iceland.

Commonwealth Icelanders also applied the same agricultural methodology, butchering neonates, to sheep and goats. However, the main product of raising sheep and goats was wool, with milk being a less frequent product. Wool growth can be inhibited by pregnancy and milking, as the animal’s body allocates nutrients towards replenishing non-wool resources (Byock 2001: 47; Yildirim et al. 2008: 75). Wool production was very important to Icelanders. Producing wool was critical to farmstead productivity as trading for wool would take away from other produced goods. It is possible that some farms had sheep and goats as their main dairy animal, rather than cows. This is because of the inherent diversity in Icelandic farming practices. However, the general trend shows the Icelandic Commonwealth focused on using sheep and goats for wool production and cattle for milk production.

There is one more notable secondary product: dung. Animal poop served many purposes on Icelandic farms. First, animal poop was repurposed as manure. Dung being used as fertilizer can be seen in *Brennu-Njáls saga.*

“‘Eigi vissu vit þat, hvat sumir gerðu,’ segja þær, ‘en einn ók skarni á hóla.’"
'Hví mundi þat sæta?' segir Hallgerðr.


‘‘We don't know what all of them were doing,’ they said, ‘but one was carting shit to the hillocks.’

‘What’s the point of that?’ said [Hallgerðr].

‘He said this would make the hay there better than anywhere else,’ they said,’’ (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 73-74)

According to Hallgerðr, Njáll has poor wisdom due to his use of animal dung as manure (Nj, in Cook 2001: 74). Using manure on the farm was a common practice in Europe by the medieval period (Jones 2004: 161). That knowledge was available to medieval Icelanders. Therefore, it is likely that Njáll using manure would not have been absurd to the contemporary Icelandic audience, which was composed of farmers. The bizarre nature of Hallgerðr’s criticism was likely meant to be humorous and endear Njáll to the audience.

There is another reason why carting around animal dung was not considered weird by medieval Icelanders. Animal poop was an important, daily commodity. Icelanders had stripped the island of almost all woodland. Importing wood from Europe solely to be used as fuel to heat homes and cook food would have been a frequent and costly expenditure. Icelanders would have been in serious trouble without a fuel source to stay warm. Oils from the flesh of sea mammals can be used as fuel, but it would have required trading or hunting. Dung was a fuel source that would be present on every active farm. Farmers could, with relative ease, have collected, dried, and stored dung for immediate or later use. This would have been less labor and travel intensive than relying primarily upon hunted sea mammals, as Icelanders were already invested in raising farm animals.
Archaeological and laboratory analysis suggests that even during the *landnám*, when wood was still present, farmers were already using cow dung as fuel (Simpson et al. 2003:1401-1402). Over time, dried dung became a more prevalent fuel source as other sources became more difficult to access or fundamentally impractical for habitual household use.

Icelanders often had to do their best with the limited resources of their environment. Compared to continental Europe, Commonwealth Iceland had fewer trade resources and was more isolated from long distance trade routes (Byock 2001: 45). Furthermore, Icelanders owned few ocean-going ships by the 11th century. Trade with foreigners would have mostly been initiated by foreigners arriving in Iceland (Byock 2001: 44). These factors created an economic system which had limited input of precious metals or typically rare materials, but still had movement of food and animal products between farmsteads. This economic system contributed to the emergence and eventual ubiquity of *vaðmál*, a homespun woolen cloth. Initially, *vaðmál* had significant export value which allowed Icelanders to purchase important goods from Norwegian traders who arrived in Iceland (Byock 2001: 44). By the 13th century, *vaðmál* was the main currency of Icelanders. It was used to balance trades, buy goods, and pay taxes (Smith 2015: 23). There were legal standards for the size and quality of *vaðmál* which made its worth equivalent to a significant amount of silver and gold (Byock 2001: 45; Smith 2015: 35; Dennis et al. 2000: 357).

The use of *vaðmál* as currency places significant economic power in the role of women and caprines. Weaving and textile production were done locally on farmsteads (Smith 2015: 24). Textile work was highly gendered in the Icelandic cultural context. Women were typically responsible for all steps in the processing of sheared wool (Smith 2015: 24). This means that, essentially, women were charged with turning wool directly into currency. While *vaðmál* is legally
currency, the situation is more complex than that. The use of \textit{vaðmál} did not preclude bartering, reciprocal gifting, or payment through equivalent values of non- \textit{vaðmál} goods (Byock et al. 2001: 31-32; Dennis et al. 2000: 21). Additionally, the nature of subsistence farming means that farmers were not entirely reliant on currency to purchase the food or goods immediately necessary for survival. Therefore, the power invested in Icelandic women by literally producing legal currency is important, but should not be viewed as equivalent to completely supporting the household.

Organizing economic values relative to silver and \textit{vaðmál} encourages having large herds of caprids. The environment of Commonwealth Iceland was very suitable for caprids. This makes it difficult to ascertain whether the emergence and frequent use of \textit{vaðmál} caused or was caused by a cultural shift towards caprine farming. It is most likely that there was a reciprocal effect. The ecology of Commonwealth Iceland caused a slight shift towards caprine farming which led to \textit{vaðmál} being a viable trade good. \textit{Vaðmál} became quite valuable economically and further encouraged caprine farming. Farmers would have been more invested in the trade and export of \textit{vaðmál} as caprine herds grew in size and frequency. The use of \textit{vaðmál} is not solely responsible for the Icelandic cultural emphasis on caprine herding, but it certainly was a contributing factor.

Medieval Icelandic farmers also kept dogs and cats in addition to their typical suite of domesticated mammals. Archaeological evidence has shown that dogs and cats were present throughout medieval Iceland (Mcgovern et al. 2007: 37). The Icelandic cat and dog populations were originally brought over during the settlement period alongside other domesticates (S. Adalsteinsson 1981). Unlike most other mammal domesticates introduced to Icelandic farmsteads, cats and dogs did not provide a direct product for farmstead use. Rather, cats and dogs performed independent labor around the farm.
One of the many issues which farmers face is dealing with rodents. Iceland did not have a rat population prior to settlement or during the Icelandic Commonwealth. However, medieval Iceland did have a mouse population. It is believed that mice arrived in Iceland alongside settlers during the *landnám* (Jones et al. 2012: 7). DNA evidence has shown that the medieval Icelandic mouse population was likely related to mice found in Viking Age contexts such as Danelaw, the Orkneys, and Scandinavia (Jones et al. 2012: 5). The effects of mice on farmstead productivity, if left unchecked, could be devastating. Mice can carry disease, damage crops, damage buildings, or even harm young farm animals. Cats were a key tool for Icelandic farmers to combat mice. Keeping cats around a farm can act as a preventative measure and a treatment. Cats were not a direct part of farmstead production schemes, rather, cats operated as an outside factor which maintained the integrity of preexisting foodways.

Archaeofaunal evidence from the *landnám* and early Commonwealth frequently includes dogs in trash pits and funerary contexts (Smith 1995: 329). Dogs in medieval Iceland likely operated in a similar manner to cats. Dogs, while they could be used as a source of meat, were more effective when utilized as supplementary protection for other food production schemes. Dogs can be effective ratters, but cats already occupied this role with a high degree of efficacy. Any ratting performed by dogs would likely have been supplementary, incidental, or due to a lack of cats. In this case, the main occupation of dogs was to protect the bodily wellbeing of livestock and farmers. Livestock were protected primarily through herding. Save for the Arctic Fox, there were no major predators in Iceland which posed a threat to sheep. Therefore, the employment of dogs would likely have been primarily to keep herds away from dangerous landscapes and to prevent theft.
Medieval Icelandic dogs, in addition to protecting livestock, also protected human members of their farmstead from outsiders. Evidence for this can be found in the medieval Icelandic literary corpus, which depicted dogs as protectors of their human household. The ability to protect humans from other humans made dogs both valuable and very dangerous.

“I því sér hundrinn, at þar eru menn fyrir, ok hleypr á hann Þorkel upp ok grípr í nárárr; þonundr ór Tröllaskógi hjó með ðøxi í høfuð hundinum, svá at allt kom í heilann;” (Nj, in Íslenzk Fornrit XII: 186).

“But as soon as [Sáumur] saw that there were men up there, he jumped at Þorkell and bit him in the groin. Onund of Trollaskog hit the dog in the head with his axe, and it went right into the brain” (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 125-126).

The above scene from Brennu-Njáls saga presents guard dogs as intelligent and vicious. Sáumur trusted Þorkell because he was a familiar face. Soon after following Þorkell, Sáumur was able to independently recognize that he was fooled and immediately took his vengeance on Þorkell. Sáumur’s intelligence, while possible, is most likely a mix of personification and a literary device meant to evoke satisfaction in the audience. While the intelligence of Sáumur may have been exaggerated, his viciousness can be corroborated by laws from Grágás.

According to Grágás, guard dogs were used to protect human lives, animals, and other property. This practice was common enough that the following laws were drafted to determine who was at fault when guard dogs cause injuries to people.

“If a dog bites a man’s animal or chases them into a perilous place, then the owner of the dog is to offer the owner of that stock of animals the same kind as perished on account of the dog.” (Grč, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 202).

“Sa er hund leysir eða fer með at hann vil ser láta fylgia þa abyrgiz sa þo at anar maðr eigi.” (Grč, dipl. transcription in Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974: 188).

“A man who lets a dog loose or handles it in such a way as to show that he is willing to have it go with him, then he makes himself responsible for it even though another man owns it.” (Grč, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 203).

If a dog were to injure another person’s livestock, then its owner was responsible to pay for damages. This suggests that dogs were treated similarly to human dependents. While dogs and human dependents were capable of independent action, their training, demeanor, and actions are still representative of the honor of their caretaker. Instances of violence were a primary concern of the Icelandic legal corpus. Injuries were very serious, particularly when people could be travelling in geographically isolated locations. Therefore, it was often necessary to determine whether or not a dog had hurt someone with proper cause.


“If a dog is tied up to guard a man’s pantry or booth or pen, then anyone who goes inside the length of its leash takes responsibility for himself, and likewise if animals go inside the length of its leash, then the owner of the dog is not responsible.” (Grč, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 201).
The law states that anyone who knowingly approaches a guard dog is responsible for their own wellbeing. Tying a dog up was critical to any legal defense against injury. Letting a dog roam loose was essentially stating that the dog could be trusted. This may not have always been the case, as Icelanders had resolutions prepared for when a dog unjustly caused the death of a human being. The law stated that should a dog kill someone, then it was legal to settle those cases without prior approval. The case would be prosecuted as if the killing had been done by a human using weapons (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 355). Stating that a dog attack on a human being is equivalent to using a weapon is an overt statement on the role and expected capability of a dog. Guard dogs were not just a preventative measure: some dogs were bred and trained to be tools for hurting humans. They were expected to see use, justly or unjustly.
Emotional Relationships

Solely studying practical animal-human relationships encourages a belief that medieval Icelanders were purely logical actors. This belief necessitates that the actions of farmers were constrained by a system of cost-benefit analysis. Yet, this is surely not the case. Most cultures and individuals do not operate in a completely logical manner. A more holistic understanding of animal-human relationships necessitates an exploration of the emotions shared between animals and humans.

Emotion is a key component of any relationship. How one feels about a specific interaction has an effect on future interactions between the same parties. The effects of emotion on decision making and life quality contributes to the importance of emotion in history (Lerner 2015: 802-803). That established, it can be particularly difficult to study and discuss emotion due to many different interpretations on the nature of emotion. This thesis approaches emotion as internal mental states caused sensory input or mental processing. Emotional states are constructed by culture, personal experience, and neurological processes (Dolcos et al. 2011: 669-670; Ford and Mauss 2015: 2). Emotions may or may not be expressed through physiological responses, with the nature of expression also being constructed by culture, personal experience, and biology (Matsumoto 2006: 220-221). The issue of approaching historical emotion is made even more complex due to cultural and temporal differences between modern analysts and past cultures. Historical emotion should be discussed contextually and on a case by case basis. Therefore, it is imperative that this discussion of emotion establishes the culture surrounding emotion in medieval Iceland.

There were two physical factors that significantly contributed to animal-human emotional relationships in medieval Iceland. First, animals were critical components of life for typical
Icelanders. The majority of the population worked on farmsteads (Byock 2001: 31, 46-47). Pastoralists inherently had to interact with a wide variety of domesticated and wild animals on a daily basis. The animal products produced on farms were integral for survival. Therefore, medieval Iceland was a society whose cultural identity was deeply connected to animal husbandry. Icelanders inherently opened themselves up to emotional relationships with animals by constructing their own identity through their relationships with animals. Second, medieval Icelandic farmsteads were somewhat isolated from one another (Byock 2001: 28, 48-49, 60). Travel off of one’s farmsteads was not always viable despite being technically possible. Periods of intensive agriculture, such as calving season or harvest season, would make it undesirable to leave the farmstead for any significant period of time. Seasonal weather patterns, such as a particularly cold winter, could also make it unreasonable to travel for long stretches of time. Travelers also had to prepare food for themselves and their horses for any journey off the farmstead. Perpetually sharing an enclosed space on a relatively isolated farmstead could negatively or positively influence any type of relationship. These two factors created contexts where people were able to easily project their identity and understanding of emotions onto animals and then interact with those animals for the duration of those animals’ lives.

The personification of animals is a key part of emotional animal-human relationships. As stated previously, emotions are partially constructed by culture (Matsumoto 2006). As such, any understanding of animal emotion is inherently affected by the culture in which that animal is being interacted with. This means that it is necessary to understand the social mores around medieval Icelandic emotion. One good mechanism for discussing historical emotion is writing. This is because literature can provide contextual examples of human reactions as well as give insight into the values of the author or redactors. The corpus of medieval Icelandic literature is robust.
However, not all of it is suited to the examination of emotion. Íslendingasögur, as well as other narrative forms of literature, are good sources for emotional analysis. This is because redactors, either consciously or subconsciously, include their views on morality, causality, and humanity. Even though emotion is present in Íslendingasögur, this does not make the study of emotion a straightforward analysis. This is because the Icelandic literary corpus could be aptly described as restrictive in its displays of emotion (Sif Ríkharðsdóttir 2017: 1). This characteristic of Icelandic literature is caused partially by the gendering of emotion. The use of emotion in medieval Icelandic literature is constructed by the belief that emotive emotion is feminine and masked emotion is masculine (Sif Ríkharðsdóttir 2017: 176). Many of the protagonists in the Icelandic literary corpus are male, meaning that their emotions are often masked. However, this does not mean that emotion is absent. The audience could understand emotion through context or attempt to infer it. In many cases it is likely that the emotions of characters were tools to progress the plot or spread the redactor’s beliefs on an issue, as the emotions of characters were still rooted in the lived reality of medieval Icelanders. Many pieces of the produced literature were written about Icelandic farming society, by Icelanders, and with an Icelandic audience in mind. The emotions that are explicitly displayed would have been relatable for the audience. Furthermore, those emotions would have originated in the lived experiences or observations of Icelandic redactors. As such, those emotions should not be disregarded as completely artificial and unrelated to Icelandic life.

There are examples of emotional animal-human relationships which use explicitly emotional language. The first of these examples comes from Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða.

“Hrafnkell átti þann grip í eigu sinni, er honum þótti betri en annarr. Þat var hestr brúnmoálotr at lit, er hann kallaði Freyfaxa sinn. Hann gaf Frey, vin sínum, þann hest hálfan. Á þessum hesti hafi hann svá mikla elsku, at hann strengði þess heit, at hann skyldi
The word *elska* is used here to describe how Hrafnkell feels for his horse Freyfaxi. *Elska* is also the word used for romantic love between two humans. The phrase *hafa elsku* would be an acceptable way to profess love. There are certainly degrees of love, but the usage of *elska* in this context inherently suggests a higher level of emotional investment, commitment, and compassion. It is tempting to suggest that Hrafnkell’s love comes solely from his reverence for Freyr. However, it seems more likely that Hrafnkell does not love Freyfaxi because the horse is committed to Freyr. Rather, Hrafnkell shows his commitment to Freyr by sharing a horse which he already loves.

Hrafnkell has a very high degree of emotional investment in Freyfaxi’s wellbeing. Although *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* is using Hrafnkell as a tool to critique obsession and unnecessary violence, the actual oath which Hrafnkell makes is not unique. Saga literature commonly depicts families feuding over perceived slights through retributive violence (Miller 1990: 179-180). Eventually Hrafnkell is forced to follow through on his oath after seeing that Freyfaxi has been ridden.

“’Illa þykki mér, at þú ert þann veg til gǫrr, föstri minn, en heima hafðir þú vit þitt, er þú sagðir mér til, ok skal þessa hefnt verða. Far þú til līðs þíns.’ En hann gekk þegar upp eptir dalnum til stóðs síns.” (Hrafnk, in Íslensk Fornrit XI: 104)
“‘I don’t like the way you’ve been treated, my foster-son. But you had your wits about you when you told me of this. It will be avenged. Go back to your herd.’ Freyfaxi went up the valley to his horses.” (Hrafnk, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 442)

Hrafnkell’s killing of Einarr for riding Freyfaxi and the ensuing conflict fits quite well into the general mold of Icelandic retributive violence. It initially seems that Hrafnkell is defending his own honor by following through on his oath and killing Einarr. Yet, the language used makes it seem that Hrafnkell is more concerned with defending Freyfaxi’s honor and wellbeing. Hrafnkell is concerned with how Freyfaxi has been treated and is focused on _hefna_, aptly translated as vengeance. Horses are meant to be ridden, so vengeance for riding a horse seems bizarre. This is because Freyfaxi is more than just a horse to Hrafnkell, Freyfaxi is a family member.

Hrafnkell uses the word _fóstri_ when addressing Freyfaxi. _Fóstri_ is a word typically used for a foster son. Fostering children in Iceland was a very important aspect of life. The relationship between foster children and their foster family was not considered less valuable or real than blood relationships (Miller 1990: 171). The use of _fóstri_ instead of _frændi or frænka_ is a recognition of the origin of the relationship, not a comment on its quality or worth. Hranfkell, by using the word _fóstri_, directly recognized Freyfaxi as a member of his core family. Hrafnkell’s oath makes much more sense in this context. Freyfaxi is a horse and cannot defend his own honor. However, Hrafnkell possesses such love for his horse that he feels the need to defend Freyfaxi’s honor as if he were human.

The role of Freyfaxi as a means to cause conflict makes any emotional analysis more difficult. Assumptions about lived experience would be very unreliable if this were the only example of an animal-human relationship that transcended into a familial one. Fortunately, it is
not the only example. Gunnarr Hámundarson also has a deep relationship with his dog Sámur in *Brennu-Njáls saga*.

“Sárt ertú leikinn, Sámr fóstri, ok búð svá sé til ætlat, at skammt skyli okkar í meðal.” (Nj, in Íslenzk Fornrit XII: 76).

“You have been cruelly used, my foster-child Sam, and it is to be expected that our deaths are meant to be close together” (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 126).

Much like Hrafknell, Gunnarr also uses the word *fóstri* to refer to his dog Sámur. Unfortunately for Gunnarr, Sámur had just been killed and let out a loud death howl. Gunnarr’s use of *fóstri* continues to suggest that animal-human relationships can as emotionally significant as interhuman relationships. Gunnarr had children and understood the implication of using the word *fóstri*. The redactors were not trying to portray a complicated scene of juxtaposed emotions. This a humanizing scene of loss and grief, which was ultimately caused by Gunnarr’s poor decisions. The expression of emotions in this scene was relatively tame due to the masking of male emotion. Yet, the word choice shows Gunnarr’s simultaneously love for his dog and grief due to death.

Word choice is very important in understanding the perspective of the redactor. Emotion masking makes the male characters act in a more muted manner, but there is still information encoded in the redactor’s word choice. The redactor used the adjective *sárt* to describe how Sámur was treated. *Sárt* translates to painfully, cruelly, or sorely. The use of *sárt* shows that Icelanders recognized that animals could feel pain, mentally process pain, and be undeserving of pain. At least in the case of important animals, there is a just way to treat them. Having empathy for animals relates to how well medieval Icelanders identified with those animals. It is arguable that Gunnarr displayed empathy earlier in the saga when dealing with his maimed horse.

“Kill this horse, he must not live maimed” (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 101)

In this scene, one of Gunnarr’s horses had its eye gouged out during a horse fight. It is difficult to know if this scene is truly empathetic or not. Gunnarr could be killing his horse for self-centered reasons. It is certainly possible that Gunnarr simply does not want the burden of caring for a maimed horse. It was stated earlier that Gunnarr’s horse was quite young (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 99). It would be a significant time and resource commitment to take care of a maimed horse for the rest of its life. If that were the case, it would be easy and nonproblematic for Gunnarr to say that. It would not be shameful to put down a maimed animal. However, that is not what Gunnarr says. The redactors focus on the horse and its life, rather than Gunnarr and his life. The decision to kill is made because of the horse’s right to exist unmaimed, rather than Gunnarr’s right to remain unburdened. An interpretation of this scene as empathetic seems more likely when viewed in conjunction with Gunnarr’s display of empathy towards the suffering of Sámur.

These literary examples suggest that medieval Icelanders valued the emotional capacity of farm animals. The use of identical language for animal-human and human-human relationships, the demonstration of grief and empathy for animal suffering, and the general personification of animals depicts a society that was emotionally invested in the wellbeing of their animals. Some theorists have suggested that it can be difficult for a meat-eating culture to become emotionally connected to their farm animals. These theorists believe that culture helps create a context where cognitive dissonance allows individuals to simultaneously kill and love animals (Dowsett et al. 2018). This interpretation is too black and white. It assumes that there is never emotional complexity. Individuals only exist in a state of positive or negative emotion. This is simply not the case. A more holistic approach would be to admit that practicality, emotion, and culture all influence animal-human relationships. Medieval Icelanders were very aware of the fact that
animals were the foundation of their society. The cultural identity displayed in the medieval Icelandic literary corpus is primarily agricultural. The depiction of emotionally positive animal-human relationships suggests that Icelanders appreciated how animals supported them. However, that appreciation inherently comes from the fact that animals needed to be exploited in order for Icelanders to survive. Loving and caring for animals is not contradictory to animal exploitation in the Icelandic context. Rather, the compassion depicted here operates as a way for Icelanders to embolden their own emotional state while bettering the wellbeing of the animals on their farmsteads.

It would be fortunate for medieval Icelanders if all emotional animal-human relationships benefited animals and humans. However, this was not the case. Life on a farm can be very stressful. Long term food security was a constant concern. These stressors can be compounded by the actions of animals. Animals are able to actively resist human efforts to control or aid them. This was the case for the protagonist of *Grettis saga*, Grettir Ásmundarson. As a child Grettir had to help his family by working directly with the farmstead’s animals. Farm life was difficult for Grettir. He often let his emotions get the better of him, taking out his frustrations directly on the animals.

“It was not long before [Grettir] found them difficult to herd, and the goslings were especially annoying. This began to irritate him, especially after he had little control over his temper. Not long after, some vagrants found the goslings lying about dead, while the geese had their wings broken.” (Gr, trans. in Byock 2009: 34)
“Nú fór Grettir upp á bak henni; hann hafði hvassan kníf í hendi ok rekr á um þverar herðar Kengálú ok lætr svá ganga aprt tveim megin hryggjar. […] Ásmundr lét drepa Kengálú.” (Gr, in Íslenzk Fornrit VII: 40, 42).

“Now Grettir got up on her back. He had a sharp knife in his hand and with it made cuts across Kengala’s shoulders and down her back on both sides of her spine. […] Asmund had Kengala killed” (Gr, trans. in Byock 2009: 36, 38).

It is difficult to describe these scenes as anything but animal abuse. Hurting these animals was completely unnecessary. The mutilation of the geese and Kengala only benefitted Grettir emotionally. Practically, these actions only put Grettir in a worse position. However, Grettir did not care about what was practical. His stress and emotions made him act illogically. Grettir’s stress was caused by his father giving him tasks which Grettir perceived as boring and unimportant (Grettis 43). This stress caused him to harm animals in what the text describes as bernskubragð, translated as childish tricks (Grettis 38). If the sole reason for killing the geese was to get back at Grettir’s father, then it would unnecessary to mention that Grettir was irritated by the geese. Grettir enjoyed causing pain to things that irritated him. The suffering of the geese was as much of a goal as actually getting back at his father. Grettir also does not flay Kengala until after he is forced to stay outside because of Kengala’s behavior.

“Grettir hugsar þá, at hann skal gera eithvert þat bellibragð, at Kengálú yrði goldit fyrir útiganginn.” (Gr, in Íslenzk Fornrit VII: 40).

“Grettir begun to think he ought to do something to repay Kengala for forcing him to stay outdoors.” (Gr, trans. in Byock 2009: 36).

Grettir views the animals on his farm as sentient actors. He believes that his animals are making conscious decisions which affect his quality of life. Therefore, the animals are responsible for their actions and are valid targets of violence. These scenes are clearly hyperbolic. Kengala survives for days after Grettir drives a knife into her and flays the hide from her entire back. A
horse surviving for days without skin is unlikely. The unrealistic nature of this scene serves to accentuate Grettir’s cruelty through prolonged animal suffering. Even though the maiming of the geese occurs outside of the narrative, the way the bodies are found is very telling. The geese are found by some travellers, implying their bodies were hidden away or somewhere out in the field. If these geese were humans, then Grettir would be subject to full outlawry as he had failed to take responsibility and announce his crime. This parallel is likely intentional, as only a few chapters later Grettir kills his first man and is subject to outlawry.

The nature of emotional relationships depicted in Íslendingasögur are variable. The majority of animal-human relationships in the sagas are emotionally neutral. Oftentimes, animals provide background information, set the scene, or develop a human character. This can be seen in the numerous horse-riding scenes, wherein the horses are simply a prop.

“Þeir Þórarinn tóku hesta þeira Þorbjarnar ok ríða þeim heim,” (Eb, in Íslenzk Fornrit IV: 37-38).

“Thorarin and his men took Thorbjorn’s horses and rode home.” (Eb, trans. in Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 53)

“Sveinninn leiddi hestinn undir honum;” (Vatn, in Íslenzk Fornrit VIII: 60).

“The boy led him on horseback.” (Vatn, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 223)

“Nú tekr hann hest sinn ok ríðr yfir á Aðalból” (Hrafnk, in Íslenzk Fornrit XI: 105).

“Then he fetched his horse and rode to Adalbol” (Hrafnk, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 443)
This trend holds true in most situations, such as when large groups of cattle or sheep were lumped together into the term fé. Fé also means wealth, suggesting a very practical and objective perspective on the role of farm animals. Yet, the logical, emotionally masked narrative which pervades the medieval Icelandic literary corpus is sometimes broken by clear displays of emotions. It is these emotional moments that provide insight into the beliefs of the redactors. Some scenes are too emotional to remain distanced and emotionally sterile. Gunnarr’s love for his dog and Grettir’s hatred for working with animals portray Icelanders as very emotional people. Icelandic farmers did not just work with their animals, they lived alongside them. Compassion, hatred, sympathy, and irritation are just some of the many emotions which farmers likely experienced. As culture dictated that public discussions of emotional connections with animals be suppressed in favor of objective storytelling, it is possible that lived experience was even more emotional than portrayed.
**Sociocultural Relationships**

The category of sociocultural relationships is less direct than the previous two categories. Sociocultural relationships pertain more to how animals are inserted into or otherwise affect interhuman relationships. The culture of medieval Icelanders dictated how animals were to be interacted with. In turn, animals were able to have an effect on the culture and society of medieval Iceland. Legislation, entertainment, economics, and foodways are just some of the many Icelandic cultural aspects which were affected by the presence or absence of domesticated animals. Ultimately, the natural behaviors and biology of animals throughout Iceland were partially responsible for the development of certain Icelandic cultural traditions.

The domain of law is inherently an attempt to organize constituents and impose human-centric order within a territory. Domesticated animals do not have a conscious voice in the construction of law, but their biology and behaviors still influence the manner in which laws are drafted. *Grágás*, an Icelandic lawbook contained within the Codex Regius dating to 1260-1280 CE, contains many laws regarding animal behavior, ownership, management, and transfer (Dennis et al. 1990; Dennis et al. 2000). While most of the laws in *Grágás* focus on the economics or responsibilities of animal ownership, there are some exceptions.

One unique instance of animal-based law pertains to mental competence in cases of disputed inheritance. Medieval Icelanders decided that a demonstration of the skills required to ride horses was sufficient to determine the mental competency of an heir.

“That man is also not a lawful heir who does not know whether a trough-saddle is to face forwards or backwards on a horse, or which way he should face. If he is more intelligent, then inheritance is to be made over to him.” (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 5-6).

It would be understandable to choose an extremely common skill when displaying mental competency. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the ability chosen by Icelanders was horse riding. Facing forward when riding a horse is a simple enough task, but actually saddling a horse requires some level of experience or knowledge. It seems most likely that, when viewed in conjunction with depictions of horse riding in sagas and the presence of horse paths throughout Iceland, this law was not meant to provide a significant barrier to inheritance. Horse riding was common enough that the vast majority of potential heirs would easily be able demonstrate their knowledge.

Legislating a proper means to determine mental faculties demonstrates that judging who was fit to inherit property was clearly important to medieval Icelanders. In addition to the practicality of this law, there is also a tone of judgement and derision nestled within the objective language. Icelanders are displaying their beliefs of basic human capability by choosing a skill that was so easily acquirable in their cultural context. Failing to perform a basic task required of Icelandic farming is equivalent to being less than an average human. In a sense, medieval Icelandic law is suggesting that one’s ability to interact with domestic farm animals is a defining trait of being an intelligent human. The fact that this law uses animals as a barrier to demonstrable humanity is further evidence of the ubiquity and cultural importance of horses in medieval Iceland.

The common nature of farm animals in Iceland also necessitated joint management techniques. Farmers desired to maintain control of their own livestock, while also maintaining positive relationships with nearby farmsteads whenever possible. Part of the purpose of Icelandic law was to codify the rights of farmers relative to one another. Additionally, laws also served as a
means to resolve disputes which arose from animal or farming activity. If one interprets the presence of laws as evidence for previous altercations or cases, then there were likely many issues in medieval Iceland caused by the use of farm animals.


“Meat is what comes from slaughtering cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. If a pig gets into horse meat, it is to be kept for three months but starved and shed its flesh and then fattened for three months. If a pig gets into dead human flesh, it is to be kept for six months, if it has put on weight, it is to be starved to shed its flesh and then fattened for six months. Then it is lawful to use the pig for food.” (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 1990: e1170).

The above law from Grágás defines edible meat as being from very specific farm animals. This definition of kjööt (meat) fit for human consumption explicitly excludes horse meat and human flesh. The law goes so far as to forbid normally acceptable animal meat due the transitive nature of consumption. Eating indirectly tainted meat is as bad as eating forbidden meat directly. The exclusion of some meats and the inclusion of others is an additional indicator of the lived reality of Icelanders. The cultural normalization of cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs is further evinced by this definition. Furthermore, Icelanders were active meat consumers and were, at least publicly, concerned with the way the animal was managed. It appears that their concern was not for the welfare of the animal, instead, the concern was for the health and moral status of the meat consumer. This stance can also be observed in other animal-based legislation of medieval Iceland.

As stated previously, food security was a major concern for medieval Icelanders. Animal products, including meat, could be the difference between survival or starvation for many
individuals. Despite cultural anxiety over potential food shortages, Icelanders explicitly forbade consuming meat from horses, dogs, cats, and some non-domesticates.


“An animal may not be eaten which is known to have killed someone. People must not eat horses, dogs, foxes, and cats; and no beasts with claws and not carrion birds. If a man eats these animals which are excluded, he is liable to a penalty of lesser outlawry.” (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 1990: 1182).

The exclusions seen in this law appear to focus on moral transference. Eating an animal that knowingly killed someone reflects upon moral status of the human consuming the meat. Grouping together instances where animals killed someone with the general consumption of horses, dogs, foxes, and cats suggests that these are actions are equally morally degrading. Notably, the punishment for improper meat consumption is lesser outlawry. Lesser outlawry is a very serious punishment, forcing the punished individual to be banished for three years. This may be viewed as excessive by outsiders, but ultimately represents the seriousness with which medieval Icelanders approached meat consumption.

Meat was not the only legislated consumable animal product. Milk production and consumption was heavily legislated. *Grágás* includes clear acknowledgements of who is responsible for dairy animals and dairy products throughout the milking, processing, storage, and consumption process. Such laws were used to prosecute anyone who mishandled or abused their lease of another person’s livestock (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 166). Due to the importance of dairy and the complicated nature of leasing livestock, laws were drafted to clarify that the
original owner of dairy animals retained ownership and rights to the distribution of milk from those animals (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al 2000: 166-167). Punishments were steep for anyone who took milk from an animal they were not supposed to. An individual could be sentenced to full outlawry for such an offense, but the decision was up to the owner (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000:167). These laws demonstrate a difference between caretaking and ownership in dairying. Farmers need to provide dairy animals with space, food, and safety in order to optimally produce milk. Ensuring a scenario where all three are sufficiently present would have taken a lot of effort and manhours. Farmers who own large herds of livestock could have chosen to lease out their herd, or parts of it, to other farmers who likely had fewer animals to take care of.


“If a man farms out stock to someone, then the agreement they made is to be binding between them. If he farms out animals with a lawful agreement on their keep, then he is to look after them so that the condition of their flesh puts them in no danger, and to tend them in the same way as his own stock and as he would if he owned them himself.” (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 167).

However, the laws in Grágás make it clear that the original farmer still had primary control and ownership over the animals and their products. The farmer who looked over the livestock received compensation in the form of payment, partial retention of animal products, or ownership of newborn animals. If any mishandling or dishonest milk trading occurred, then the owner of the animals had the right to pursue legal action. Legal proceedings of any sort inherently put one farmer in conflict with another. The hyper specific nature of some of these laws, such as dealing with tertiary individuals knowingly consuming illicit milk produced by leased livestock which the
owner failed to retrieve, suggests that there is precedence for these events. Therefore, it is likely that disputes over livestock were both common and complex. In addition to reactionary laws, the complex nature of inter-farm relationships also caused some preventative laws to be drafted. These laws were likely drafted in order to minimize the potential for livestock-based conflict instead of just resolving it.

“When men put their horses into someone’s keeping at the General Assembly in accordance with the article of the law, the man who accepts a horse is not to use it for anything except for driving horses to where they are kept or from there to Þingvöllr and for keeping paid watch on them, and he is not to ride any horse so much that it does not stay well filled out.” (Grg, dipl. transcription in Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974: 124).

Travelling to the Alþingi every year was a cultural marker and legal obligation for some medieval Icelanders (Byock 2001: 75-76). Eligible Icelanders would have travelled to the Alþingi from throughout the island. Travelling large distances by land would have necessitated horses as the Alþingi occurred during a specific date range. After arriving at the Alþingi individuals would have had to deal with legal disputes, law recitation, the development of new laws, and generally developing social or legal connections (Byock 2001: 75-76; 174-175). Taking care of animals falls fairly low on the priority list relative to these legal obligations. The law regarding who takes care of travelers’ horses is very similar to the stipulations regarding Freyfaxi laid out by Hrafnkell. In both Grágás and Hrafnkels saga, horse owners have a right to control their property and dictate the terms in which horses can or cannot be used. The law further suggests that due to the importance of horses for travel, individuals who agreed to watch horses were using them for
personal travel. Illicit use of horses could certainly create tension. Horse riding, especially without knowing a specific horse’s physical limitations, could easily tire or injure a horse. To medieval Icelanders, who need horses to travel and perform labor, this has the same effect as destroying or stealing someone else’s tools.

There is also the issue of the actual livestock theft. It can be difficult to tell one animal from another when farms have potentially hundreds of animals under their care. Medieval Icelanders drafted a law which organized a system of marking animals in order to prevent intentional and unintentional theft.

“Navt oc savðe oc svín scal maðr marka a eyrom en fogla scal marka a fitiom. oc ero þav ein lög mörc a þvi fe.” (Grg, dipl. transcription in Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974: 155)

“A man must mark cattle and sheep and pigs on the ears but birds on the webs of the feet, and only those are lawful marks on such creatures.” (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 169)

Marking livestock to ensure traceability is not a unique practice. Farm animals have been marked among many cultures throughout history (Blancou 2000). Marking techniques and strategy were likely already known amongst the Icelandic settling population. Animal markings were popular throughout farming societies in Europe for roughly a thousand years prior to the landnám (Blancou 2000: 421). Although the primary evidence for Icelandic marking practices is in the Codex Regius, dating to the 13th century, the usage of marking techniques was likely already brought over during the landnám. The settlers of Iceland would have been cognizant that their survival and prosperity was contingent on the number of animals they had. The settling population had an organized system of land claims to ensure control over arable land to feed livestock (Byock 2001: 84). These factors make it more likely that settlers would also have been concerned with ensuring control over the livestock themselves.
Marking animals was inherently meant to ease human-human relationships and had a limited effect on the life of behavior of animals. Such markings determined how animals would be grouped, with similarly marked animals being kept together on their respective farmsteads. Ultimately, these markings were used to make animals more easily traceable after they were released into the *almenning*.


“Each man shall have a single mark on his stock, both cattle and sheep. He is to have marked stock on his that he can get at by the time eight weeks of summer have passed. If he does not do so, the penalty is a fine.” (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 167).

The *almenning* was a communal pasture. Communal pastures could easily be overgrazed and rendered barren if too many farms let their animals graze uncontrollably. In order to prevent overuse farmers had to limit the amount of time their herds could spend in the *almenning* to a maximum of eight weeks. Animals in the *almenning* suddenly had their typical kin and social groups disrupted, as herds could comingle if left to their own devices. Farmers likely would have wanted to let their animals graze the communal space for as long as possible, while also wanting to get them out quickly to avoid the fine (Dennis et al. 2000: 167). Allowing animals to freely graze for any period of time could have resulted in inter-herd pregnancies, lost animals, and even accidental theft as farmers got their herds out of the *almenning*. Laws were written for exactly such incidents.

“Ef fe o einkvøt kemr i anars manz land en þess er á anat en dilcar sipan er viii. Vicor er oaf sumre eða siðar. þa á sa er a lande þvi byr at einkynsa fe þat sínø einkvø” (Grg, dipl. transcription in Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974: 155).
“If unmarked animals, other than sucking lambs, come into someone’s land after eight weeks of summer have passed or later, then the man householding on that land has the right to mark them with his mark,” (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 168).


“If a man finds in his pen a lamb belonging to someone else and marks it, he is under no legal penalty for that if a panel gives a verdict that he thought it belonged to him.” (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 168).

The very nature of the *almenning* makes it easy to take another farmer’s animals either intentionally or accidentally. It can be difficult to prevent herds from comingling unless shepherds are going out and sleeping alongside their herds. Accidental thievery was common enough that it was necessary to have panels determine if animal thefts were intentional. Intentional theft was a much more serious crime. It may have been difficult to prove intention when herding animals from the *almenning*, but taking animals directly from someone else’s animal enclosures displays clear intention.

“Maðr scal sitt fe eítt a brott reka fra rétt, því at eins anars manz fe ef sa hevir um boðit er á.” (Grg, dipl. transcription in Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974: 155).

“A man is to drive only his own stock away from a fold, and only animals belonging to someone else if the owner has made him agent to do so.” (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 169).

Direct theft from another farm was very possible. Farms were often quite spread out with animals present in many different locations at the same time. During the summer, some animals would be up in the mountains, others would be at the *sel*, and some could even be on the farmstead proper. During the winter, cattle would have to be kept indoors while some caprines could be left
to graze and survive outside (Byock 2001: 45, 54; Zori et al. 2013: 153). Keeping watch on the animals at night would be difficult with most farmhands sleeping in the main hall of farm (Byock 2001: 42). Animals at the sel or in the mountains would be vulnerable to any potential misconduct without risk of alerting the majority of a farm’s workers. Fears over the loss of important animals drove the Icelandic legislature to analyze and address all the specific ways in which animals and their products could be misappropriated.

The importance of farm animals to Icelanders was also due to the need for entertainment. Animals were a source of fun and a great distraction from work. One such form of entertainment mentioned in the Icelandic sagas was horse fighting.

“Starkad had a good stallion, reddish in color, and he and his sons thought that no other horse could match it in a fight. […] They had a great chat about all the farmers in Flkotshlid and eventually discussed whether any of them would fight his horse against theirs.” (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 98).

_Hestavíg, hestaaing, and hestaat_ can all be translated as a horse fight. These events would have pitted one farmer’s horse against another. Horse fights happened at large formal gatherings as well as small informal ones (Gogosz 2013: 26). The actual horse fights could have been organized as a tournament with brackets and seeding or as a free for all (Gogosz 2013: 27). In order to get the horses to fight the farmers often had someone provoke the horses (Grettis saga: 84; Gogosz 2013: 27; Njáls saga: 101).

“Síðan rennskar at hestarnir ok bitask lengi svá, at ekki þurfti á at taka, ok var þat it mesta gamán.” (Nj, in Íslenzk Fornrit XII: 150).
“The horses went to it and bit at each other for a long time so that there was no need to touch them, and it was great sport.” (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 101).

Ultimately, the horse fighting had little to do with the honor of the horse. The horse acted as proxy for the honor and social status of the farmers. A horse with a good track record suggests that the owner has superior training and breeding skills. The strength and endurance of their horses directly correlates to animal husbandry ability.

Unfortunately, horse fighting did not bode well for the health of horses. Horse fights in 20th century Iceland were described by contemporary Icelanders as sometimes going on for hours or even until a horse collapsed dead (Valtý 1903: 35). Medieval Icelanders may have been more conservative with the lives of their horses, as resources were more limited than in the 20th century. That said, there are some stories in which horses are maimed or killed during horse fights (Grettis saga: 85; Njáls saga: 101; Gogosz 2013: 28). The overt goal of Icelandic horse fights is prestige for the winning farmer and entertainment for the crowd.

“ef þér ráðið þessu, en þó vil ek þess biðja yðr, at vér etim svá hestunum, at vér gerim òðrum gaman, en oss engi vandráði, ok þér gerið mér enga skǫmm.” (Nj, in Íslenzk Fornrit XII: 149).

“if you have your way, but I want to request this - that we fight our horses to provide pleasure for others and not trouble for ourselves, and that you don’t try to shame me.” (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 99).

However, just as the winner gains social status it is likely that the loser loses social status. The death or maiming of a horse is a loss of property value, and therefore social status, and losing a public fight can be a source of ridicule and shame. Gunnarr alludes to this when he says that a horse fight can lead to trouble (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 99). Being upset over a lost horse fight can lead to interpersonal conflict, inter-farm rivalries, violence, or more horse fights. Retaining
honor and retribution for slights are important in Icelandic culture (Byock 2001: 17, 79). Horse fighting, while a culturally important source of entertainment, was a dangerous sport which may have sometimes strained relationships between participants.

An additional source of entertainment and social capital was feasting. Feasting in medieval Iceland was more than just a large meal. Icelandic feasts were ritualized activities where large groups came together for public displays of social status and in order to reinforce relationships through shared meals (Byock 2001: 67; Zori et al. 2013: 152). Seating arrangements and discussion which occurred during feasts were very important in reinforcing or the establishment of social hierarchy (Zori et al. 152-153). Feasts occurred at special events such as holidays or major life events, such as births, weddings, and deaths. More informal feasts could also have occurred at socially significant times. Friends or nearby farmsteads might have feasts simply to reinforce their existing bonds.

“þat var siðvenja þeira Gunnars ok Njáls, at sinn vetr þá hvárr heimboð at þórum ok vetrgrið fyrir vináttu sakir.” (Nj, in Íslensk Fornrit XII: 90).

“It was the custom between Gunnar and Njal, because of their close friendship, that every winter one of them would invite the other to his home for a winter feast.” (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 57).

Both informal and formal feasting involved specific behaviors and expectations based on relative status and gender (Byock 2001: 67; Zori et al. 2013: 151-153).

The food at feasts was just as important as the behavior of the participants. Feasting was inherently a display of excess and luxury. A feast is not a benefit to the patron’s social status if the food served was only fit for basic subsistence. Beef was one food that was a major indicator of status. Cattle provided food over long periods of time in the form of milk, and performed physical
intensive labor around the farm. Slaughtering cattle for their meat gave up some long-term sustenance for short term abundance. The provision of feast meat, due to the inherent finality of slaughtering an animal, was a critical part of how Icelanders displayed investment in one another. In Iceland there were no large terrestrial mammals other than foxes, which, by the 13th century, were not supposed to be eaten (Dennis et al. 1990: 1182). Consequently, Icelandic culture would have had some replacement for maintaining social ties without mammal domesticates to provide meat for feasting.

Feasting and horse fighting was not the only form of social gathering for medieval Icelanders. Icelandic culture placed a strong emphasis on storytelling and oratory prowess (Byock 2001: 143). Gatherings would have had many people telling personal tales, retelling sagas, or attempting poetry. One can imagine a rowdy crowd of farmers providing friendly heckles to a storyteller or a group of farmworkers gathered indoors listening to a saga to pass the winter. Animals were a critical part of Icelandic narratives as seen throughout this thesis. The presence of animals as well as the actions associated with them in Icelandic literature can provide a great deal of information about the Icelandic lifestyle. In addition, the sheer quantity of references to animals is valuable information in its own right.

Icelandic stories often include animals or animal products as mechanisms for human conflict. Freyfaxi simply existing in Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða caused the deaths of many men (Hrafnk, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 442). The theft of cheese in Brennu-Njáls saga led to a blood feud killing children, farmhands, young adults, patriarchs, and matriarchs (Nj, trans. in Cook 2001: 222-223). In Vatnsdæla saga, cats are infused with magic to create a powerful defensive force (Vatn, trans. in Attwood et al. 1997: 231). Grettis saga has a scene where Grettir and one of his rivals start hitting each other in the middle of a horse fight (Gr, trans. in Byock 2009: 85).
These examples are part of a much larger cultural trend. Stories involving animals were relatable. Farm animals were part of work, food, entertainment, and law. They were everyday sight. Animals inherently ground Icelandic stories in reality and make them feel true, regardless of whether the stories are truly realistic. Having stories where an ornery animal gets its just desserts can be satisfying to a tired farmer. Stories where a loving pet gets killed evokes sadness throughout denizens of the longhouse. The emotional investment of Icelanders in animals encouraged a storytelling tradition that was highly integrated with animals.
Conclusions

The intent of this paper was to group and analyze the different types of animal-human relationships between domesticates and medieval Icelanders. Three overarching types of relationships were identified: practical, emotional, and sociocultural. Examples from each of these categories of relationships were seen in either the archaeological record, literary record, or both.

Practical relationships, which benefit humans through the production of materials meant for human use, took a variety of forms. Medieval Icelandic foodways were heavily composed of dairy from fé (livestock). Kjöt (meat) from farm animals would be eaten seasonally, due to seasonal slaughters, but was likely not an abundant, daily food source. A lot of work was required to create and maintain a system which could exploit animals efficiently enough to survive in Iceland. Despite the best efforts of Icelanders, famines occurred periodically in medieval Iceland. Long term changes in climate as well as short term weather patterns sometimes devastated the Icelandic farming population (Byock 2001: 57). Diversification of foodways into fishing and hunting helped increased food security, but most of the Icelandic population was heavily reliant on domesticates and agricultural goods.

Icelanders’ reliance on domesticates was prevalent enough that vaðmál, a fabric made of wool, became a common form of currency for export and internal trade. Vaðmál was legally recognized as a form of currency in medieval Iceland (Smith 2015). The existence of a subsistence economy alongside a legislated animal-product currency was primarily viable due to Iceland’s focused, communal, and intentional exploitation of caprids. The ability to produce wealth further incentivized farmers to have herds of sheep which continued to entrench animal husbandry in Icelandic culture.
Protection of the farm was of the utmost importance as livestock provided food for the farmstead and directly produced wealth. Cats were able to protect stockpiles of food and wool from rodents. Giving a relatively small amount of food to cats ultimately protected a larger chain of food production. Dogs protected humans as well as the physical farmstead itself from intruders. *Grágás* included laws which detailed the proper way to use guard dogs as well as who was responsible in instances where someone was injured by a dog (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 187-188, 202-203).

All of these relationships are focused on what service an animal provided to humans: food production, wealth production, and protection. However, many relationships do not have a tangible, materialistic, or purely logical benefit. Relationships and decisions can be rooted in experienced emotion and perceived emotion (Lerner et al. 2015). The daily interactions and cultural position of animals in medieval Iceland created many opportunities for emotional relationships to form between animals and humans.

Companionship between an animal and a human was not uncommon in *Íslendingasögur*. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Gunnarr and Sámur shared a deep bond and felt affection for one another. The same can be said of Hrafnkell and Freyfaxi in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*. Both Gunnarr and Hrafnkell, the humans in the relationship, used the term *fóstri* (foster son) to refer to their favorite animal (Hrafnk, in *Íslenzk Fornrit XI*: 104; Nj, in *Íslenzk Fornrit XII*: 76). The word *fóstri* is a very charged term in *Íslendingasögur*, as familial bonds were extremely valued in medieval Icelandic culture (Byock 2001: 188-190). Using the same word for a human foster son and a loveable animal demonstrates a high level of emotional connection and personification.

*Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, as well as *Íslendingasögur* in general, certainly include fictionalized elements to drive a narrative. This means that the word choice and
events should not be taken as direct proof for historical events. However, the word choice and events do reflect upon the beliefs and culture of the redactors. In the cases of Freyfaxi and Sámur, the redactors depicted intelligent animals and described them with loving, emotional language. While these forms of emotional connection may not have been applicable to every animal or every farmer, the redactors believed that these scenes would resonate with the experiences of other farmers. This suggests that emotional connections, compassion, and elská (love) were common enough among farmers and their animals to be included in literary narratives.

The third type of animal-human relationships, sociocultural relationships, governs how animals were inserted into or otherwise affected interhuman relationships. By becoming members of human society, through both practical and emotional relationships, animals inherently affected the culture and social dynamics of Icelanders. One of the effects of animal-human interactions was the Icelandic desire to organize the rights of animal owners through legislation. Grágás included provisions detailing who had the rights to animals and their products (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 167). Due to the autonomous nature of animals, Icelanders also found it necessary to determine who was responsible for the actions of animals (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 1990: e3114). In most cases, the owner of an animal was responsible for their actions, save for instances where someone else was acting improperly around an animal. Animals became so centric to the Icelandic lifestyle that interactions with animals became the legal baseline for determining mental competency. Understanding how to properly saddle and ride a horse was used to determine one’s intelligence and eligibility for inheritance (Grg, trans. in Dennis et al. 2000: 5-6).

Viewed in conjunction with one another, these relationships depict a society where animals and humans were equally constrained by the environment and culture of Iceland. Humans altered their culture and behavior to suit their animal companions, while animal biology and behavior
were reciprocally altered through the mechanisms of Icelandic culture. Additionally, animals were not viewed solely as tools by Icelanders. In some cases, they received the same legal treatment as human children. Just as adults were expected to take care of and assume responsibility for actions taken by their dependents, farmers were legally expected to take care of and assume responsibility for actions of their animals. The complexity of relationships is inseparable from Icelandic culture. Animals were not only an aid for Icelanders, but made life in medieval Iceland viable. As such, it is clear that the historical course of medieval Iceland was created through the cumulative efforts of both animals and humans.
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