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Chapter 4
Passports, Permits, and Labour Im/Mobility in Iceland, 1780s–1860s

In the 1780s, following a decade of debate, a series of legislative reforms were introduced by the Danish royal authorities to enhance the regulatory framework of labour in Iceland. In particular, an act passed in 1783 prohibited any form of masterless casual labour without a written permit from the local authorities, tightening previously existing restrictions on masterless labour dating back several centuries that required a minimum of property ownership and payment of a special tax.[1] The new law stated that any landless persons finding themselves without employment in service during the traditional turnover period in spring were to inform the local authorities, who would assist them in securing such a position or else provide them with a written attestation allowing them to remain masterless for the remainder of the year. Craftsmen such as carpenters, spinners, weavers, and coopers as well as cottars (fishermen living in cottages near fishing grounds) were exempt from this rule, but at the same time they required attestation from the local magistrate to be allowed to work in these professions.[2]

Among other measures, including stricter forms of punishment for noncompliance, the new laws introduced a reformed internal passport system. It required anyone regardless of social status who wished to travel from one county to another to obtain a document detailing who they were as well as where they were heading and for what purpose, and have it signed by the county magistrate and

1 In pre-industrial Iceland, as in most of Europe, people were required to belong to a certain household and submit to the authority of the head of that household. For landless adult workers, this usually meant becoming servants. Masterless labour was any labour arrangement that fell outside this requirement. In other words, masterless labourers were workers who were not subject to the authority of any master but could work on their own behalf as day labourers, for piece rates, or under similar arrangements. They were a frequent subject of complaint by authorities and social commentators throughout the early modern period in Iceland as well as in Europe in general. For Iceland, see Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, "Tactics of Evasion: The Survival Strategies of Vagrants and Day Labourers in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Rural Iceland," *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17 (2020): 34–56. For Europe see Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 426–547.

2 Oddgeir Stephensen and Jón Sigurðsson, eds., *Lovsamling for Island* I–XXIII (København: Höst, 1853–1889), here IV, 683–686.

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their parish priest. These documents were valid for six months, and from 1808 onward they also had to include a physical description of their bearer. All household heads were required to inspect the documentation of anyone arriving in their home and report persons lacking the required papers to the local authorities.[3] While the passport law was explicitly aimed at controlling vagrancy and preventing debtors from absconding, its implicit purposes also included enhancing control and surveillance of labour mobility by rendering workers and their movements more observable – or, as theorist James C. Scott puts it, more "legible"[4] – to the authorities and thus more governable, as this paper will show. We argue that these revised laws formed what some mobility scholars have termed a "mobility regime", a form of governmentality that aims to simultaneously facilitate and contain movement, which is inherently entangled with modes of exploitation and discrimination, and thus ultimately of social order.[5]

Overall, the reforms undertaken by the Danish authorities were intended to strengthen the pre-existing dominant labour regime of compulsory service under which all landless or unemployed adult persons, male or female, were required to become servants on an annual basis, mostly on farms.[6] This was the dominant form of labour relation in the Nordic countries – including Iceland – during the early modern period and remained so until the latter half of the nineteenth century.[7] At the same time, these reforms developed in response to social and economic changes in the wake of developments in the mid-eighteenth century that led to increasing specialisation of work – and in particular to the proliferation of mostly home-based wool manufacture and more intensive (though still largely seasonal) fishing. As historian Hrefna Róbertsdóttir has argued, the reformed labour laws were meant to facilitate this development without disrupting the "social equilibrium" of a societal structure based on rural animal husbandry, reflecting the growing desire of the Danish rulers of Iceland to rationally govern and control the labour market in the country.[8]

3 Ibid., 580–582.

4 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

5 See Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar, "Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 183–300.

6 Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk: Vistarband og íslenskt samfélag á 19. öld* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2017).

7 Jane Whittle, "Introduction: Servants in the Economy and Society of Rural Europe," in *Servants in Rural Europe 1400–1900*, ed. Jane Whittle (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017), 12.

8 Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, *Wool and Society: Manufacturing Policy, Economic Thought and Local Production in 18th-Century Iceland* (Gothenburg: Makadam, 2008), 157–169.

One would assume these legislative reforms to have created a significant paper trail of casual labour permits, passports, and related documentation – a veritable archive of individual identities.[9] However, the implementation of the revised labour laws was often arbitrary and developed somewhat independently of the aims of the legislative authorities, as local labour needs and the subversive practices of individual workers frequently diverged from the regulatory coercion inherent in the Icelandic labour laws. This is reflected in the archives, with the preservation of documents relating to passport control often haphazard and differing greatly between regions. In this paper, we will discuss the somewhat ambiguous role of internal passports and the associated casual labour permits in facilitating the increased governance of labour coercion in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Iceland, a subject that has hitherto not received much academic scrutiny. Focusing on the use and non-use of state-issued documentation by workers, we argue that while legislation and other normative sources along with the archival records of issued passports provide fascinating insights into the means by which the authorities sought to govern the im/mobility of the labour force, they cannot be studied in isolation. Rather, any such analysis must consider the actual practices involved: It needs to take into account the various tactics employed by labourers to either evade or exploit – and thus subvert – the passport and permit systems in order to escape or least mitigate the coercion implicit in the labour legislation and the compulsory service regime. We will begin, however, by briefly examining the social and economic context of labour in pre-industrial Iceland.

Economy and labour in pre-industrial Iceland

While its geographic dimensions make Iceland the tenth largest island in the world, the territory was home to a miniscule population of 50,000 to 80,000 people in the period from 1700 to 1900. Icelandic society during this time was almost entirely rural, dispersed across the entire island but mostly confined to its edges as the interior was (and remains) mostly barren and uninhabitable.[10] As late as

9 The role of passports and similar official paperwork in developing and shaping notions of a permanence of individual identity as well as in creating modern statecraft is thoroughly discussed in Jane Caplan and John Torpey, eds., *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

10 For a general overview of Iceland and its social, economic, and demographic history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years: The History of a*

the 1860s, some 97% of the population still lived in rural areas, with the independent farm household serving as the basic economic unit and site of production.[11] However, early modern Iceland was also characterised by a dual economy that was highly seasonal and required a mobile and accessible workforce. One part of this economy consisted of animal husbandry supplemented with the hunting of seals and other wildlife for additional income. On the other side was the business of seasonal fishing, in part for local consumption but mainly for the export of stockfish to markets in northern Europe – and from the 1760s onwards, also of "wet" (salted) fish to southern European markets.[12]

In practice, this distinction was not quite so clear nor on equal terms. Fishing was indeed vital to household consumption patterns as well as being of significant economic value in terms of wealth production and foreign trade. Farming, however – and with it the social role of the farmer and his household – remained culturally fundamental to Icelandic society, structuring its social organisation and "cosmology", as anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has put it, while fishermen and their seaside communities were commonly associated with poverty, immorality, and social disorder.[13] A symbiotic relationship nonetheless existed between these two different economies, as some contemporaries observed,[14] since their labour pools were in constant flux, with labour power flowing in both directions on a seasonal basis. While the origins of this system of reciprocal and circular labour mobility remain speculative, by the sixteenth century the south-western and western

Marginal Society (London: Hurst & Co., 2000), 187–224, 261–293; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Wasteland with Words: A Social History of Iceland* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 18–63.

11 Gísli Á. Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland 1801–1930: Studies in the Relationship Between Demographic and Socio-Economic Development, Social Legislation and Family and Household Structures* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 1988), 37.

12 Gísli Gunnarsson, *Monopoly Trade and Economic Stagnation: Studies in the Foreign Trade of Iceland* (Lund: Ekonomisk-historiska föreningen i Lund, 1983); Guðmundur Jónsson, "Institutional Change in Icelandic Agriculture, 1780–1940," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 41 (1993): 101–128; Magnússon, *Wasteland with Words*, 18–32; Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, "Frá búdrýgindum til markaðsveiða: Selveiðar og selveiðihlunnindi við Húnaflóa, 1703–1918," *Skírnir* 195, no. 1 (2021): 158–192.

13 Kirsten Hastrup, "Closing Ranks: Fundamentals in History, Politics and Anthropology," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2006): 147–160, here 148–151. For a more detailed analysis, see Kirsten Hastrup, *Nature and Policy in Iceland 1400–1800: An Anthropological Analysis of History and Mentality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). On the discourse on fishermen and their communities, see Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 99–100 and Agnes Arnórsdóttir, "Var hyskið í þurrabúðunum bjargarlaust með öllu? Viðhorf til tómthúsmanna í Reykjavík á fyrri hluta nítjándu aldar," *Sagnir* 5, no. 1 (1984): 7–13.

14 Skúli Magnússon, *Forsøg til en kort beskrivelse af Island (1786)*, ed. Jón Helgason (Köbenhavn: Munksgaard, 1944), 37.

parts of the country had become the primary fishing regions during the winter season, with workers streaming in from the north and south from February to May only to return home for the labour-intensive summer season on their farms. The fishermen living in the south and west in turn migrated to the northern and southern farming districts to participate in the hay harvest in late summer.[15] This pattern seems to have intensified in the eighteenth century. Map 4.1 portrays this cycle of seasonal labour mobility visually. It shows the seasonal flow of labour from inland farming districts in the north and south to the main fishing grounds in the southwest and west during the winter fishing season (dotted arrows) and the opposite flow of workers from the fishing grounds in the counties of Gullbringusýsla and Snæfellsnessýsla to the inland farming districts for the hay harvest in summer (dark arrows). The named locations indicate places mentioned in this chapter, but the edges of the circles do not represent the actual boundary lines of the counties mentioned; they merely provide a rough indication of their location on the map.

Vital to the understanding of this dual economy is the distribution of its most important resource – land – and its influence on social relations. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, private ownership of land was around 52%, with almost all of it belonging to a very small elite. Another 32% were owned by the church and the remaining 16% by the king.[16] The same parties were heavily involved in the fishing industry as well, owning the majority of the fleet of rowing boats and running substantial and labour-intensive fishing operations.[17] A good example is the fishing district of Akranes in western Iceland in the year 1809, where Magnús Stephensen, chief justice at the Icelandic High Court (*Landsyfirréttur*) and a prominent member of the landowning elite, owned half of the 70 fishing boats in the village while none of the other 20 boat owners possessed more than three boats.[18]

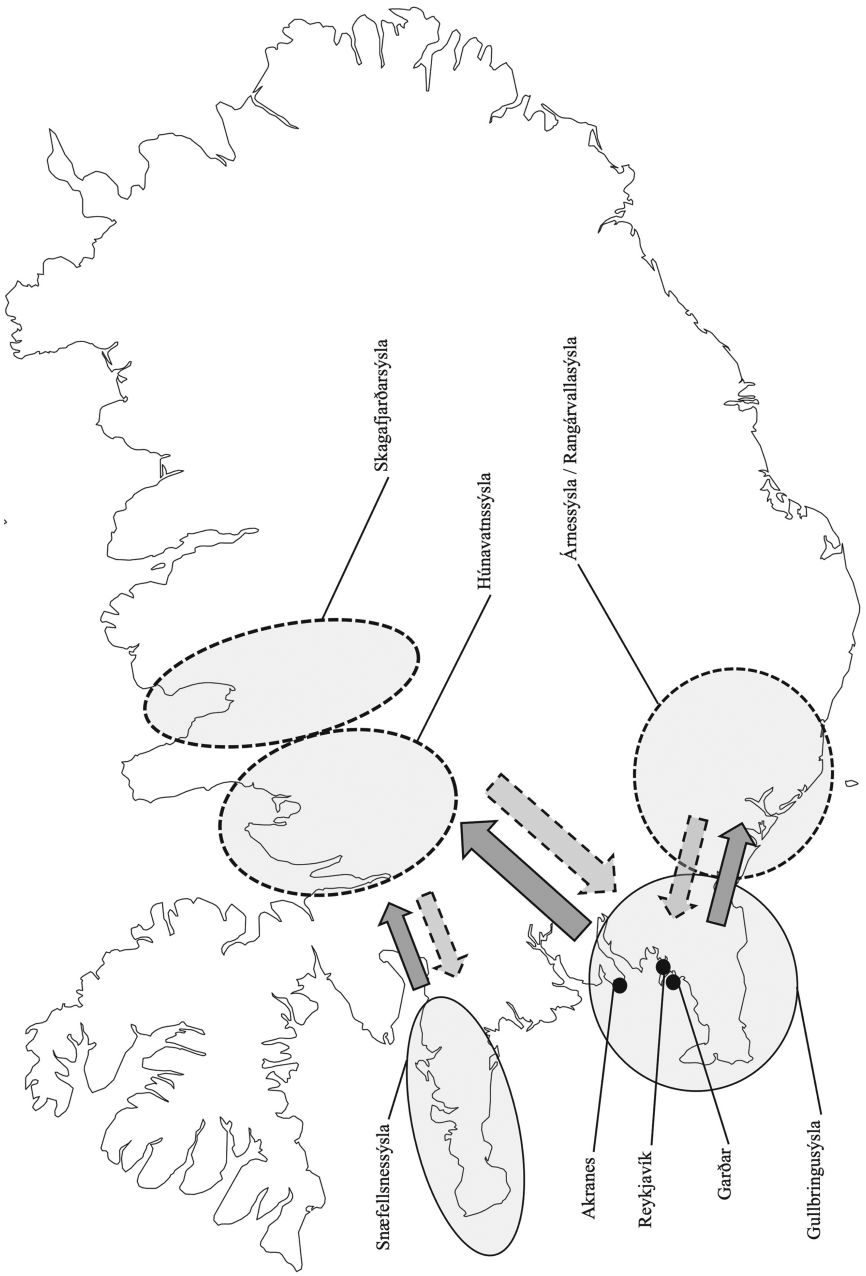
This high concentration of the means of production in the hands of a scant few proprietors meant that social relations were characterised by a dichotomy in several ways: On the one side was the small class of landowners and the other a

15 Helgi Skúli Kjartansson and Orri Vésteinsson, "Hvar reru fornmenn til fiskjar? Um vertíðamynstur miðalda," *Saga* 56, no. 2 (2018): 84–121; Emil Gunnlaugsson, "Kaupavinna á 19. öld: Um hreyfanlegt vinnuafl og verkafólk frá Reykjavíkurkaupstað" (BA thesis, University of Iceland, 2020), 9–11.

16 Björn Lárusson, *The Old Icelandic Land Registers* (Lund: Ekonomisk-historiska föreningen i Lund, 1967), 60–61.

17 See for example the discussion on the fishing operations in the Skálholt diocese, which required hundreds of fishermen during the winter season, in Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, "Biskupsstóll í Skálholti," in *Saga biskupsstólanna: Skálholt 950 ára – 2006 – Hólar 900 ára*, ed. Gunnar Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Hólar, 2006), 126–134.

18 Ólafur B. Björnsson, *Saga Akraness* I (Akranes: Akranesútgáfan, 1957), 282.



Map 4.1: The circuits of seasonal labour mobility in nineteenth-century Iceland, in Emil Gunnlaugsson, “Kaupavinna á 19. öld”.

large mass of subalterns who owned little or no property and were subject to some form of labour coercion as a result.[19] This latter group can be divided into four main categories: tenant farmers, fishermen living in cottages (*búð*, *þurrabúð*, *tómthús*) by the seaside, farm servants, and masterless day labourers (*lausamenn*). Taken together, these four groups essentially made up the entire workforce of the country. But although they were largely from the same social class and there was a significant level of mobility between the four categories, tenant farmers remained socially superior to the other three and were perceived to be culturally constitutive as heads of farming households and thus as masters to their workers.[20] In this chapter, we will focus on the latter three groups (fishermen, farm servants, and masterless labourers), which can summarily be characterised as the labouring poor of Icelandic society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[21]

Compulsory service, coercion, and the seasonal labour market

Having labour power accessible throughout the year for a modest price (such as live-in servants) was deemed essential to the dual economy of fishing and livestock farming by contemporaries. In the late eighteenth century, a prominent state official calculated that an average-sized farming household needed at least three male farmhands and three maidservants to perform all the labour such a

19 Labour coercion is understood here in very broad terms akin to the taxonomy introduced in Marcel van der Linden, "Dissecting Coerced Labor," in *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, ed. Marcel van der Linden and Magaly Rodríguez García (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

20 Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*, 60–83; Guðmundur Hálfdanarson, "Social Distinctions and National Unity: On Politics of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Iceland," *History of European Ideas* 21, no. 6 (1995): 763–779. Christina Folke Ax has convincingly argued the need for a more nuanced view of social groups and their stratification and "cultural profiles" in pre-industrial Iceland. For the purposes of this analysis and the sake of simplification, we have refrained from delving too deeply into the cultural and social diversity within the peasantry and the labouring poor of pre-industrial Iceland. See Christina Folke Ax, "De uregerlige: Den islandske almue og øvrighedens reformforsøg 1700–1870" (PhD thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2003), 24–52.

21 Swedish historian Jonas Lindström defines the labouring poor as "people who neither had enough land nor were paupers, but depended on wage work for their survival." Jonas Lindström, "Labouring Poor in Early Modern Sweden? Crofters and Lodgers in Västmanland in the 17th Century," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 44, no. 4 (2019): 403–429, here 404.

household required, including the seasonal labour mobilisation to fishing stations.[22] As described above, this need was met with compulsory annual service for all adults without tenancy or a legal occupation, a form of coerced labour management that had ancient roots but became increasingly important from the seventeenth century onwards. This coercion was first and foremost legal – that is, in the form of a legal requirement. While more research is necessary, the current state of knowledge shows that the law was applied with considerable force at times but was more relaxed during other periods.[23] Some county magistrates tasked with enforcing the legislation were exceptionally vigilant and had their local constables follow up on any indication that the servant laws were being transgressed. Those in violation were subjected to corporal punishment, imprisonment, or forced placement in service depending on the circumstances.[24] Evasion of service and other tactics of everyday resistance remained relatively common nonetheless, as Vilhelm Vilhelmsson has documented extensively.[25] For most people, service remained a temporary position, however, and life-cycle service was an accepted norm and perceived as an important part of social reproduction in Iceland.[26]

Although bylaws on wages and daily output had existed since medieval times, servants were sometimes able to negotiate wages and working conditions with their masters, and they could (and often did) move from one household to another during the traditional turnover period in May.[27] From 1685 to 1866, servants were subject to strict regulations on domestic discipline stipulating that masters should physically reprimand disobedient or obtuse servants, with updated regulations in 1746 adding that servants were forbidden to venture beyond the boundaries of the household without their master's permission. There is ample

22 Skúli Magnússon, "Sveitabóndi," *Rit þess íslenzka lærdómslistafélags* 4 (1783): 137–207.

23 Yngvi Leifsson, "Flökkufólk: Líf og ferðir flökkufólks á Norðurlandi 1783–1816" (MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2011); Guðmundur Már Ragnarsson, "'Ráddu þér sjálfur, vertu frjáls': Markmið og framkvæmd lausamennskulaga 1863" (BA thesis, University of Iceland, 2013); Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 175–179; Jónsson, *Vinnuhjú á 19. öld*.

24 Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 201–210.

25 Ibid.

26 See Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, "The Moral Economy of Compulsory Service: Labour Regulations in Law and Practice in Nineteenth Century Iceland," in *Labour Laws in Preindustrial Europe: The Coercion and Regulation of Wage Labour, c.1300–1850*, ed. Jane Whittle and Thijs Lambrecht (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Press, 2023), 227–245.

27 Arnór Sigurjónsson, ed., *Búalög: Verðlag á Íslandi á 12.–19. öld* (Reykjavík: Framleiðsluráð landbúnaðarins, 1966). On servant mobility, see Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*, 82. On master-servant contract negotiations, see Vilhelmsson, "The Moral Economy of Compulsory Service."

evidence that this corporal chastisement was practised widely.[28] Servant labour was therefore subject to a great deal of violence, coercion, and immobilisation on multiple levels, as the state forced most landless people into service that subjected them to the labour needs and personal authority of their masters.[29]

Coercion was of course also inherent in the social relations of many tenant farmers. With ownership of land came the ability to organise labour on a large scale, which in the eighteenth century included corvée labour (*kvöð/kvaðir*) for many tenants. In the southern and western parts of the country, where fishing was of greater economic importance, a common type of *kvöð* was to make tenants row their landowners' boats for a certain number of days each season.[30] It has been estimated that at the turn of the nineteenth century, around 9,000 workers were needed to man all of the rowing boats in Iceland, the majority of which were located in the fishing districts in the south-west and west.[31] This massive requirement of temporary labour power could not be met by the local population alone – in part due to the unsustainable demographics of fishing communities such as the parish of Hvalsnes, where mortality generally outpaced births in the period from 1750 to 1850, but also due to the prohibitive labour and settlement legislation implicitly aimed at hindering the growth of non-farming communities and securing labour power for the farming economy.[32] Instead, mobile workers – mostly tenant farmers and their servants – journeyed from northern and southern farming regions to the Reykjanes and Snæfellsnes peninsulas in mid-winter when there was less work on the farms, leaving the women and children in charge of the everyday tasks of maintaining the household. When travelling for this work, the farmers and servants were known as *vermenn* ('fishing-station men') after their destinations for the winter. In the fishing districts, they joined the crews of boats that were sometimes owned by the peasants themselves but more often by wealthy estate owners, merchants, or church and royal estates. When the fishing went well, this could be a very profitable endeavour. For servants, however, their catch

28 Loftur Guttormsson, *Childhood, Youth and Upbringing in the Age of Absolutism: An Exercise in Socio-Demographic Analysis* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2017), 235–250; Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 111, 117–121, 126, 130, 157.

29 Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*.

30 Óskar Guðlaugsson, "Í kvaðar nafni" (MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2017), 17–56. This system entered decline before the turn of the nineteenth century and began to disappear from there on out.

31 Jón Þ. Þór, *Ránargull: Yfirlit yfir sögu fiskveiða á Íslandi frá landnámsöld til skuttogaraaldar* (Reykjavík: Skerpla, 1997),72–73.

32 Loftur Guttormsson, "Population, Households and Fisheries in the Parish of Hvalsnes, Southwestern Iceland, 1750–1850," *Acta Borealia* 28, no. 2 (2011): 142–166.

remained the property of their masters unless they had previously negotiated otherwise, as was sometimes the case.[33]

Cottars, seaside farmers, and their servants in turn travelled from the south-western fishing districts to the farming regions in the north and south to work for remuneration – often paid in products such as butter – during an eight-week period at the peak of the labour-intensive hay harvest season in July and August. This was called *kaupavinna*, which directly translates to 'wage-work', and can be traced to the sixteenth century at least, although it increased substantially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[34] Concerned with the high pay this work provided as a result of the heightened demand for extra labour during the harvest, local authorities frequently tried to impose a maximum wage.[35] Often returning to unemployment in autumn, some of the landless among these migrants turned to vagrancy and begging for a short period before heading to their homes in the fishing stations of the south-west.[36]

While this circular flow of labour was shaped by the needs of the dual economy of fishing and farming and the dominant labour regime of compulsory service, the high degree of mobility and disruption of the disciplinary regime of rural households it entailed was also a constant cause of concern for local authorities, who feared the subversive influence of the combination of uncontrolled mobility, wage labour, and the undisciplined nature of masterlessness. Some landless workers were indeed tempted to evade service altogether and join the fishing season in winter and *kaupavinna* in the summer, working illegally on their own as masterless day labourers, while making a living for the rest of the year working various casual jobs, begging, or travelling around selling tobacco or other luxury products. This invited further worries regarding the vice and immorality of uncontrolled labour mobility as well as regular complaints about shortages of servant labour.[37] The revision of the labour laws in the 1780s was in part intended to rectify this problem. It turned out to be more difficult to implement than the authorities imagined, however, as the next two sections will illustrate.

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33 Lúðvík Kristjánsson, *íslenzkir sjávarhættir* II (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1982), 365–443.

34 Gunnlaugsson, "Kaupavinna," 9–10; Skúli Magnússon, *Beskrivelse af Gullbringu og Kjósar sýslur (1785)*, ed. Jón Helgason (København: Munksgaard, 1944), 77.

35 Gunnlaugsson, "Kaupavinna," 58–59.

36 Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, *Lýsing Íslands* IV (Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag, 1922), 335.

37 Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 165–254; Guðný Hallgrímsdóttir, *A Tale of a Fool? A Microhistory of an 18th-Century Peasant Woman* (London: Routledge, 2019), 58–59.

Passports and im/mobility

This section examines the implementation and use of passports in the years following the relevant decree passed in 1781, as well as several debates that shed light on how contemporaries interpreted and understood the new regulations. In doing so, particular focus will be placed on the reactions of the groups most affected by these passports – that is, the seasonal labourers and tenant farmers employing them in the fishing districts of the county of Gullbringusýsla.

The roots of the late eighteenth–century passport system can be found in two different earlier types of identity documents in use in Iceland. Dating to the sixteenth century, the first of these was a written attestation,[38] a passport of sorts given to the 'deserving poor' – meaning persons who were unemployable but allowed to move around and sometimes beg.[39] This was later extended to include servants when they left service in one household for another.[40] Another document type pertained to peoples' sacraments. Taking the sacrament was a ritual normally undertaken twice a year by all individuals in the early modern Icelandic church. The prerequisite for taking the sacrament was basic knowledge of Lutheran theology and of obedience to church law. Failure to comply could result in being banned from communion.[41] From at least the seventeenth century onward, a written attestation from a parish priest concerning an individual's sacrament was required by law when moving to another parish, which meant that priests had an active role in policing movement.[42] The passport law of 1781 broadened the scope of these requirements to apply to nearly all movement between counties regardless of social status or the purpose of the journey. It also further regulated passport control, detailing both the process of acquiring a passport and of reporting newcomers to the authorities. All passports now had to be issued by the county magistrate rather than by the local police constable (*hreppstjóri*), and they also required an attestation from a priest. Peasants were to report all newcomers to their parish priest, who would review their passports and report any misgivings to the county magistrate. Peasants sheltering travellers without passports risked financial punishment or worse, and the same applied to priests who issued

38 This would be a handwritten note containing relevant information about its bearer and his or her status as being unable to work, as well as the priest's signature and/or signet.

39 *Alþingisbækur Íslands* II: *1582–1594* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1915–1916), 223.

40 Stephensen and Sigurðsson, eds., *Lovsamling for Island* I, 433; II, 615–616.

41 Einar Arnórsson, *íslenzkur kirkjuréttur* (Reykjavík, 1912), 128–132.

42 Már Jónsson, ed., *Guðs dýrð og sálnanna velferð: Prestastefnudómar Brynjólfs biskups Sveinssonar 1639–1674* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2005), 70.

attestations without the former approval of county magistrates.[43] This time-consuming and burdensome process may be part of the reason why the system remained difficult to enforce and was either ignored or interpreted in contrasting ways, as the following paragraphs will detail.

In 1786, Markús Magnússon, dean of Kjalarnesþing and priest of the Garðar parish in Álftanes in Gullbringusýsla, a district encompassing some of the most important fishing stations in the country, wrote to the newly appointed governor Hans von Levetzow concerning passport use (respectively the lack thereof), informing him that the passport decree of 11 April 1781 was to all intents and purposes not in effect. He claimed that people from the "uplands" (inland farming regions in other counties) were streaming to the seaside and complained that the authorities were blind to what kind of people they were. Even in the few instances where people had acquired passports, their documents did not attest their status and whether they were farmers, servants, casual workers, or vagabonds, thus seriously curtailing their usefulness as tools for managing labour mobility by rendering their bearers more legible.[44] As Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has argued, the sedentary life of farming was considered the cornerstone of moral living and the foundation of social order in early modern Iceland. Unrestrained mobility exercised by masterless workers and vagabonds was thus perceived as a major source of immorality and disorder and deemed intolerable in a society built on the hierarchy of the Lutheran household and the moral duties of obedience and industriousness.[45]

The dean was very concerned with morals in his community and viewed seasonal fishermen as the prime source of disturbance.[46] In his letter, he also stated that passports were necessary for individuals to legally take the sacrament – itself another source of moral regulation and social control – since many workers stayed in the fishing stations for large parts of the year. He offered the suggestion that fishermen should be required to hand over their passports to the respective parish priest upon arrival, effectively preventing them from moving to other parishes without the approval of the local ecclesiastic authorities.[47] Regardless of the region's economic need for labour during the fishing season, mobility was thus

43 Stephensen and Sigurðsson, eds., *Lovsamling for Island* IV, 580–582.

44 National Archives of Iceland (NAI). Governor of Iceland. III-143. Letters from Kjalarnesþing to the governor (1786), Markús Magnússon to Levetzow, 10 January 1786.

45 Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, 113; Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 82–90.

46 NAI. Dean of Kjalarnesprófastdæmi. BC/1. Correspondence book (1784–1796) see letters between 1784 and 1788.

47 NAI. Governor of Iceland. III-143. Letters from Kjalarnesþing to the governor (1786), Markús Magnússon to Levetzow, 10 January 1786.

apparently viewed as highly suspect by local authority figures, with passports explicitly cited as a tool for maintaining moral order and an ideal way of controlling the flow of movement between different sites of labour extraction such as inland farms and seaside fishing stations.

Later the same year, the governor of Iceland issued a directive ordering every person travelling between regions to abide by the passport laws of 1781, which prompted letters of protest from seasonal as well as local fishermen. These letters shed light on the contrasting understandings of the passport laws, showing that notions of what constituted illegal movement were both diverse and complicated. For example, some *vermenn* wrote that the county magistrate in their home district had simply dismissed their requests for passports, as they were not moving permanently but instead travelling temporarily and would thus return home at the end of the season. Others stated that they had understood the laws to apply only to vagrants, adding that the effort of acquiring a passport, which was costly and required a lot of additional travel, was a significant burden for impoverished workers. Some locals in the fishing districts were concerned that imposing passport use on all travellers would inhibit necessary seasonal labour power from undertaking the journey and thus cause a labour shortage, which would be damaging for the boat owners.[48] These protests illustrate how many people – labourers as well as employers – initially considered the revised legislation to not be relevant for the average farmer or servant, and how the line of demarcation between accepted and forbidden mobility was contested by those who were subject to the requirements of the law.

The coercive nature of the internal passport regime as well as the limitations of its reach become more evident when looking at its actual implementation. During the first six decades of the nineteenth century, passport control became firmly administered in the fishing districts of south-western Iceland. This development was no doubt connected to a renewed crackdown on vagrancy and masterless labour after 1809 and the increasing administrative power of state organisations in this area as Reykjavík grew to become the administrative and economic centre of the country.[49] A considerable number of passports (around 5,000 trips) from this

48 NAI. Governor of Iceland. III-143. Letters from Kjalarnesþing to the governor (1786), Jón Arngrímsson, Guðmundur Jónsson, and Jón Jónsson to Levetzow, 21 March 1786, Jón Ingimundarson and Jón Jónsson to Levetzow, 22 March 1786, Einar Þorkelsson to Levetzow, 24 March 1786, Jón Jónsson, Oddur Sigvaldsson, Sveinn Jónsson, and Björn Þorgeirsson to Levetzow, 27 March 1786, Árni Jónsson, Jón Erlendsson, Þórður Sighvatsson, and Snorri Jónsson to Levetzow, 11 April 1786, and Jón Erlendsson to Levetzow, 12 April 1786; III-173. Letters from Dalasýsla to the governor (1786–1803), Complaints about the passport directive for those who leave the county to fish, 17 July 1786.

49 Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 177; Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, 201–205, 213–216. Differences in the intensity of state surveillance existed between peripheral areas and the centres of administration

period have survived in the archives of the county of Gullbringusýsla and the town of Reykjavík itself, where passport surveillance was most intense. These documents show how the system functioned as a class-based mobility regime whose primary purpose was to manage and control labour. For example, there is a noticeable absence of certain social groups: farmers are extremely few, and priests and state officials are non-existent in these archival remnants. Cottars, day labourers, and servants, on the other hand, are well represented and make up the vast majority of people found in the passport archives. Around one third of these mobile workers were women in the early 1800s, but their proportion diminished to around 12% by mid-century, indicating an increasingly gendered division of labour as modernisation gradually pervaded Icelandic society.[50]

Looking at the implementation of passport laws also illustrates the importance of seasonal mobility for the survival of the labouring poor in the fishing districts of the south-west. As discussed in the previous section, almost no possibilities for legal casual labour existed in Iceland at the time. The decree of 1783, which essentially banned masterless labour, did however make an exception for people dwelling "by the seaside" who made their living mainly by fishing, granted they engaged in masterless work only after obtaining a passport for the journey and only during the fishing off-season. Participating in the hay harvest in inland farming districts was considered quite lucrative, and there is some archival evidence that servants would bargain for the right to go to *kaupavinna* in the summer when negotiating the terms of their employment with their masters.[51] The high degree of labour mobility between the fishing and farming districts highlights the flexibility of these labour relations, which produced a distinct set of master-servant relations mostly specific to Gullbringusýsla and Reykjavík and characterised by the combination of service or tenancy with wage labour.[52]

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or transport links; this was the case with the 18th-century passport system in France and also seems to apply to Iceland, see Vincent Dennis, "The Control of Mobility in France, 1680–1780," 7–8.

50 Gunnlaugsson, "Kaupavinna," 37, 42, 45. Carolina Uppenberg has described similar patterns concerning changing gender divisions of labour during the second half of the 19th century, as well as how rural male servants gradually gained a higher degree of independence in their work compared to women, see Carolina Uppenberg, "I husbondens bröd och arbete. Kön, makt och kontrakt i det svenska tjänstefolkssystemet 1730–1860" (PhD thesis, Gothenburg University 2018), 273–288.

51 NAI. County magistrate in Gullbringu- and Kjósarsýsla. ED2/41. Probate records (1862–1865), folder 18.

52 Maria Ågren has argued for the importance of analysing labour practices, as they highlight notions of difference and flexibility in the social reality of working people in early modern times. See Maria Ågren, "Introduction," in *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society*, ed. Maria Ågren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–18.

This flow of labour and the associated specific pattern of labour relations is precisely what drew the ire of the authorities and explains why passports were a more distinct feature of life in this part of Iceland than elsewhere on the island. Impoverished seasonal workers were distrusted by the local authorities, who feared people with financial or other personal commitments might abscond. The mobility facilitated by way of passports was thus conditional, with the documents required to specify both point of origin and destination and their validity being limited to six months. Those who were granted such passports were also subject to the whims of the authorities. One example of this is a passport issued in 1814 to a poor man who was on his way to *kaupavinna*; on the document is noted the strict condition that the man was to return after the summer, and that his acquired wages would be used to feed his three children who had become paupers.[53]

Passports also functioned as tools for managing people residing by the seaside. Iceland suffered a harsh economic depression during the Napoleonic wars, and the distress severely hampered the livelihoods of non-agricultural workers in fishing areas in particular. Many people were subsequently displaced by local authorities under the pretext of the poor law legislation stipulating that permanent settlement for five years was a prerequisite for poor relief entitlement, as a result of which many people were forcibly returned to their birthplace for support. In 1807, placards were set up in Reykjavík instructing people to leave for their place of birth if they could not sustain themselves or were in the city without passports.[54] To facilitate this expulsion of landless workers and paupers from the county of Gullbringusýsla to their places of origin all over the country, the authorities issued passports serving as official documentation so they would not be turned away upon arrival. As many as 30 people were sent away with passports in one single day in 1807, most of them from the same parish.[55] Passports therefore also functioned as an extension of the poor laws, facilitating the forced removal of labourers who had lost their livelihoods. During the same period, passport control of incoming persons became more systematic in Reykjavík and the surrounding county of Gullbringusýsla, as previously mentioned.

The implementation of passport legislation outside of the main fishing counties in the south-west seems to have been laxer and more haphazard. Let us look at a few examples from the period between 1809 and the 1830s. While sentencing

53 NAI. County magistrate in Gullbringu- and Kjósarsýsla. C/3. Correspondence (1814–1815), no. 168.

54 Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, *Ómagar og utangarðsfólk: Fátækramál Reykjavíkur 1786–1907* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1982), 14–23, 34–36.

55 NAI. County magistrate in Gullbringu- and Kjósarsýsla C/3. Correspondence (1806–1810), see all passports from 25 June 1807.

a person for vagrancy in 1810, the county magistrate of the northern county of Skagafjarðarsýsla stated that people had never had to fear the passport laws until then, as they had not been implemented in the region.[56] The same magistrate had replied with laughter when approached by a man asking for a passport on his way south to the fishing stations in 1808, stating that it was not necessary and a waste of time. As the *vermaður* wrote in his autobiography, however, the passport laws had become more strictly enforced by 1813.[57] In 1839, the county magistrate of Húnavatnssýsla commented on the fact that none of the men travelling south to the fishing stations from the county applied for passports anymore. 155 of them had obtained papers in 1821 when he had just taken office, but they stopped doing so shortly thereafter, apparently without any repercussions.[58] In the year 1822, the magistrate of Rangárvallasýsla had to send passports by mail after *vermenn* from his county arrived at the fishing stations in Árnessýsla, where the issue of their lack of papers was raised. None of them had thought it necessary to obtain travel documents.[59]

The passport laws of 1781 were thus enforced rather erratically in the decades after their inception, with considerable differences between years, officials, and regions. In the fishing districts in the south-western part of the country where they were primarily put to use, the passports served as much to govern the lives and restrict the mobility of the local labouring poor as they did to facilitate the seasonal movement of *vermenn* to the fishing stations in order to better manage the use of their labour power. They therefore supported an increased governance of coerced labour by making workers' mobility more legible. The implementation of the laws was severely limited in many parts of the country, however – due in part to the rural nature of the society and its lack of infrastructure, which made acquiring a passport time-consuming and difficult, and in part to the minimal presence of professional government bureaucracy to implement the requirements of the legislation. Evasive tactics employed by persons subject to the law also played an important role, as will be discussed the following section.

56 Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 176.

57 Gísli Konráðsson, *Ævisaga Gísla Konráðssonar ens fróða, skrásett af honum sjálfum* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1911–1914), 72–73, 94.

58 Jón Eyþórsson, ed., *Sýslu- og sóknalýsingar Hins íslenzka bókmenntafélags 1839–1873* I: *Húnavatnssýsla* (Akureyri: Norðri, 1950), 6; Bjarni Guðmarsson, "Fáein orð um verferðir Húnvetninga á fyrri tíð," *Húnavaka* 30 (1990): 163–175.

59 NAI. County magistrate in Árnessýsla. A/1. Correspondence book (1822–1828), 22 January 1822.

Subversive mobility and other tactics of evasion

In January 1786, the police constables in the district of Álftanes in Gullbringusýsla compiled a list of the names of 26 masterless labourers (*lausamenn*) residing in the area at the request of the new governor of Iceland, Levetzow, whose residence was located nearby. While a few of the recorded individuals were invalids, most were men in good standing who had never been "a burden for the community" or engaged in peddling, begging, or similar social offences. Indeed, many had conscientiously paid the required tax on masterless labour and all their other duties to the church and the local poor relief fund as stipulated in the pre-1783 regulations. They had primarily worked in "the fisheries or other lawful employment", as the document stated, with some even operating their own boats and thus being employers as well as workers. One week later, two separate documents declared that these men had now become servants, listing the names of their masters and the farms on which they resided.[60] This procedure was in accordance with the revised law on masterless labour introduced in 1783 and discussed at the beginning of this chapter.[61]

A royal proclamation issued several weeks thereafter, following an enquiry by a local fisherman who was in need of workers, shows how this reconfiguration of the legal and social status of workers entailed an increased level of coercion and dispossession for the labouring poor. It stated that all fishermen who had previously worked on boats owned by *lausamenn* were required to become servants, and that their new masters would henceforth decide on whose boats they would serve and who would lay claim to their wages. The only exceptions were cottars or "other free folk" who continued to be permitted to hire themselves out to whatever boats they pleased.[62] Becoming a cottar, however, required not only a permit from local authorities – who were generally reluctant to provide them, as the perceived unreliability of fishing as a livelihood meant cottars were commonly seen as a potential burden on poor relief funds – but also the goodwill of landowners willing to allow cottages on their property.[63] Cottars were therefore not always as free to dispose of their labour as the proclamation implied, since their landlords often imposed such a heavy burden of corvée (mostly in terms of

60 NAI. Governor of Iceland. III-143. Letters from Kjalarnesþing to the governor (1786), Eyvindur Jónsson, Auðunn Bjarnason, Eyjólfur Jónsson, Einar Bjarnason, and Hans Ormson to Levetzow, 6 January 1786 and 14 January 1786.

61 Stephensen and Sigurðsson, eds., *Lovsamling for Island* IV, 683–686.

62 NAI. Governor of Iceland. I-21. Correspondence book (1786), resolution dated 2 March 1786. It remains unclear what other "free folk" he was referring to.

63 Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*, 96.

rowing on the landlord's boats) that the cottars were effectively bound to them and their labour needs to an extent similar to servants. This fact was well known to the governor issuing the proclamation, as he was embroiled in a heated debate with Ólafur Stephensen, one of the most powerful landowners in the country, over the latter's extensive use of corvée labour for his fishing fleet at the time.[64]

The affair in Álftanes illustrates how the revised legislation affected the organisation of labour when it was enforced: Almost without exception, the 26 fishermen were forced by threat of imprisonment to give up living and working independently and take up positions as servants to others, whereby they became embedded (at least in theory) in the culture of household discipline and hierarchy and were subject to the labour needs of their masters. As noted by physician and naturalist Sveinn Pálsson in his report on the county of Gullbringusýsla written in 1792, however, while masterless labourers were "no longer tolerated" and should be either imprisoned or forced into service, "they nonetheless still exist but hide from the authorities" by enlisting as servants under false pretences with the assistance of complicit local tenant farmers.[65] This was nothing new, of course: The practice of 'fake' service by individuals who did not fulfil the steep property requirements to be legally masterless was a common matter of complaint in the decades prior to the law reforms of the 1780s as well.[66] Indeed, one of the primary aims of the revised labour laws was to curtail such evasion. Yet while the reformed legislation made such tactics both more difficult and the punishment more severe, the practice continued and remained a common issue in the nineteenth century, as Vilhelm Vilhelmsson has discussed extensively elsewhere.[67] The same seems to have applied to often illegal cottar settlements, which flourished during certain periods and became the basis for the development of towns and villages around the turn of the twentieth century.[68] The remainder of this chapter will focus on the limitations of the labour law reforms, and the directives on passports in particular, in the management of coerced labour by analysing some of the tactics employed by the

64 Gunnlaugur Haraldsson, *Saga Akraness* II: *Átjánda öldin* (Reykjavík: Uppheimar, 2011), 181–201; Einar Hreinsson, *Nätverk och nepotism: Den regionala förvaltningen på Island 1770–1870* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs universitet, 2003), 158–178.

65 Sveinn Pálsson, *Ferðabœkur Sveins Pálssonar. Dagbœkur og ritgerðir 1791–1797* (Reykjavík: Snælandsútgáfan, 1945), 610.

66 See for example Hrefna Róbertsdóttir and Jóhanna Þ. Guðmundsdóttir, eds., *Landsnefndin fyrri 1770–1771* I: *Bréf frá almenningi* (Reykjavík: Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2016), 365; Hrefna Róbertsdóttir and Jóhanna Þ. Guðmundsdóttir, eds., *Landsnefndin fyrri 1770–1771* II: *Bréf frá prestum* (Reykjavík: Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2016), 184.

67 Vilhelmsson, "Tactics of Evasion"; Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, "Ett normalt undantag? Tilfälligt arbete i lag och praktik i 1800-talets Island," *Arbetarhistoria* 41, no. 3–4 (2017): 32–40.

68 Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*, 32–40.

labouring poor in attempts to manoeuvre within and around the coercion and surveillance stipulated by the legislation.[69]

Árni Sveinsson (1771–1839) was an impoverished fisherman who lived in a cottage in Gullbringusýsla for some time around the turn of the nineteenth century, but later travelled regularly between fishing districts with his second wife and their young children until local authorities separated the family in 1815 or 1816 due to Árni's apparent inability to provide for them – a procedure common in Iceland when families became homeless and/or dependent upon poor relief.[70] He subsequently became a vagrant, roving around the western and northern parts of the country and rarely staying in one place for long. As a youth he had learned about natural medicine; this allowed him to exchange healing practices for food and shelter on his journeys, earning him the nickname Doctor Árni and the general goodwill of local communities. In between bouts of vagrancy, he would join shark fishing vessels for the winter season in northern Iceland and spend long periods collecting herbs for making medicine. When Árni was arrested and tried for vagrancy in 1821, the subsequent trial revealed the various ways in which he had evaded apprehension and forced placement in service during the preceding six years.[71] For instance, he had acquired a passport from the county magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla in northern Iceland in 1818 by producing a letter from a local farmer confirming that he was his servant. The letter turned out to be a forgery written by Árni himself.

Outright forgery of passports was probably infrequent, as it required some skill in reproducing official documents. The acquisition of passports through fraudulent means as in the case of Árni Sveinsson as well as other unlawful uses of travel documents were probably more common. While documentary evidence is limited, such practices are implied in various declarations and resolutions penned by the authorities. An amendment to the passport laws in 1808, for example, stated that all passports had to include physical descriptions of their bearers and their own signature written in the presence of the relevant authorities, indicating that people may have

69 The concept of "tactics" is borrowed from Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). For further elaboration on its application to studying labour and coercion, see Vilhelmsson, "Tactics of Evasion."

70 Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, "Fattigvården på Island under 1700-talet," in *Oppdaginga av fattigdomen: Sosial lovgivning i Norden på 1700-talet* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1983), 187–215; Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson "The Poor Laws and the Family in 19th Century Iceland," in *The Nordic Family: Perspectives on Family Research*, ed. John Rogers and Hans Norman (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1985), 16–42. The text follows the Icelandic tradition of referring to people by their given name (first name) and not their patronym, as family surnames were (and are) not commonly in use in Iceland.

71 The case of Árni Sveinsson is discussed in detail in Vilhelmsson, "Tactics of Evasion," 47–55.

been sharing passports or acquiring them under fake names or false pretences. Subversive practices of this sort are well known in the historiography of passports throughout early modern Europe.[72] A declaration issued by the chief of police in Reykjavík in 1804 that reminded residents of their responsibility to uphold the passport laws underscores this. The text stated that it was common for outsiders to come to Reykjavík "without a pass, or with an illegal pass" and take up residence with locals, emphasising that passports should only be accepted once they had been validated by the police chief's office and thus implying an effort to rein in misconduct of this type.[73] Guidelines sent by the district governor for northern and eastern Iceland in 1810 strictly demanded that county magistrates providing passports to servants seeking a change of residence were to request some form of guarantee that this was truly the case, indicating that false testimonies on the matter were a known problem.[74]

There are some documented cases of individuals acquiring passports by way of falsehoods or fraud, including convincing county magistrates to issue passports for them by lying about service contracts with peasants in distant counties.[75] The case of Eiríkur Eiríksson is telling in this regard. Eiríkur was interrogated in the county of Húnavatnssýsla in northern Iceland in 1837 on suspicion of being a vagrant and masterless. He had been in the county for a few years, apparently as a servant (although this remained dubious), before heading south to Gullbringusýsla for the fishing season. Upon returning, he claimed that he could not secure a servant position, leading him to roam around the district doing casual work wherever he could find any. Upon being apprehended, he insisted he was a servant on the Straumur farm in Gullbringusýsla and only needed a valid passport to be able to return there. There is no indication that Eiríkur was ever a resident in Straumur,[76]

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72 Valentin Groebner, *Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 190–221; Alison K. Smith, "False Passports, Undocumented Workers, and Public (Dis)Order in Late-Eighteenth-Century Russia," *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 3 (2020): 742–762; Andreas Fahrmeir, "Governments and Forgers: Passports in Nineteenth-Century Europe," in *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, ed. Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 218–234.

73 NAI. Police chief of Reykjavík. C/1. Correspondence (1803–1806). Resolution no. 292, 23 July 1804.

74 NAI. County magistrate of Skagafjarðarsýsla. B/136. Amtsbréf um vegabréfslausa menn 1786–1825. Circular, 10 March 1810.

75 NAI. County magistrate of Gullbringusýsla. C/5. Correspondence (1824–1826). No. 621. 6 November 1825. For other examples, see Leifsson, "Flökkufólk," 30–31, 92–93.

76 He is not to be found in parish registries of the Garðar parish, to which Straumur belonged, for the years 1835–1838, nor in the ministerial books in which parish priests registered people arriving in or leaving their parishes based on submitted passports.

however, and his recorded testimony before the court is rife with contradictory claims regarding his social status and spatial movements. He nevertheless appears to have received a passport, and the case was resolved amicably.[77]

The cases of Árni Sveinsson and Eiríkur Eiríksson also reveal that peasants did not always ask people arriving on their doorstep for passports as they were required to by law, even when taking them in for longer periods and employing them. Indeed, none of the 38 peasants interviewed in the case of Árni Sveinsson had asked him to present any documents. Other research indicates that this obligation was only occasionally fulfilled by peasants, mostly when they were already suspicious of the person in question or had clashed with them in a different matter.[78] This, too, was a matter of complaint by state officials, who regularly found reason to emphasise and reiterate the duty of household heads to inspect the documentation carried by visitors.[79] The apparent apathy towards passport control is captured comically in a play from 1796 by Sigurður Pétursson (1759–1827), who later became a magistrate in Reykjavík. In the play, a farmer in a fishing county asks a faraway traveller and obvious vagrant who has come to his home to show his passport. The vagrant simply taps his shoes and says, "These are my passports, they go all over the land and are valid all over the world." The matter is then forgotten about until the vagrant has managed to cheat the farmer out of some money.[80]

While the reluctance of the peasantry to participate in policing the mobility of the labouring poor may have been owed in part to practical reasons such as the difficulty of reporting visitors without passports to the relevant authorities, who often resided far away, and their own need for temporary workers, it also stemmed from the long-standing cultural tradition of hospitality compelling households to provide shelter and food for a limited time (generally a maximum of three days) to visitors regardless of their social standing.[81] In the harsh winter climate of a subarctic island nearly devoid of infrastructure such as bridges and roads, this could

77 The case is discussed in more detail in Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 206–208.

78 Leifsson, "Flökkufólk."

79 See for example NAI. County magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla. GA/5–2. Dóma- og þingbók (1807–1812), 122; NAI. County magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla. GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1819–1821), 376; NAI. County magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla. GA/7–1. Dóma- og þingbók (1825–1827), 506; NAI. County magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla. GA/9 1. Dóma- og þingbók (1837–1842), 278. These are only a few samples taken from a single county; there are many similar proclamations in court records from all over Iceland.

80 Lárus Sigurbjörnsson, ed., *Leikrit Sigurðar Pétursonar: Hrólfur og Narfi* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1950), 15.

81 See Jón Jónsson, *Á mörkum mennskunnar: Viðhorf til förufólks í sögnum og samfélagi* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2018), 164–166.

be a matter of life and death. As one prominent state official put it, the peasantry viewed it as a punishable offence to deny visitors food and shelter "even if they know that it is a vagrant"; this was justified with the simple refrain that "we all deserve to live".[82] Some vagrants even specifically referred to this tradition during interrogation by declaring that they had not stayed in any one place longer "than the law allows", erroneously mistaking custom for law.[83]

This transgressive mobility was characteristic for labouring poor who remained outside the compulsory service system and thus on the margins of the law for one reason or another. Árni Sveinsson rarely spent more than a week or two in the same place, and the transitory life of Eiríkur Eiríksson is described similarly in court records. While some itinerant labourers and vagrants sought to obtain passports to facilitate their movement, others simply ignored the law, relying instead on the goodwill and complicity of peasants and employers. One county magistrate wrote in exasperation in 1781 that it was "impossible" for the authorities to apprehend these noncompliant labourers as they remained mobile "like a band of outlaws", immediately moving to another district once they became aware of the authorities looking for them – more often than not with the help of local peasants who covered for them.[84] It was this uncontrolled mobility of the labouring poor that the revised passport legislation was intended to prevent and uproot, but its success was obviously limited. When perusing the vast and diverse archives of state officials, one regularly encounters casual references to people moving into or out of districts without the required documentation.[85] This constant movement can be considered a tactic in many instances – a subversive mobility with the aim of evading the authorities in order to make a living outside the confines of the compulsory service system.[86] At the same time, it is also an example of what theorist Rob Nixon has called "slow violence": an implicit undercurrent of coercion and violence inherent in the labour laws that forced those among the labouring poor who were unable (or unwilling) to establish their own households or become servants to be constantly on the move and on the lookout for authority figures,

82 Magnússon, *Beskrivelse*, 21.

83 NAI. County magistrate in Eyjafjarðarsýsla. GA/4–1. Dóma- og þingbók (1813–1819), 2r.

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

85 See for example NAI. County magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla. GA/5–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1819–1821), 346; NAI. County magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla. GA/7–2. Dóma- og þingbók (1827–1830), 32–35; NAI. County magistrate in Gullbringu- and Kjósarsýsla. C/2–1. Correspondence (1795–1803), 21–22, 93, 112, 113–114.

86 For further elaboration on this argument, see Vilhelmsson, "Tactics of Evasion."

rarely finding the chance to establish any significant social and emotional connections in stable communities.[87]

The immobilising aspect of the passport laws naturally also applied to the sedentary population of peasants and servants, who were as prone to violating them as were the itinerant labouring poor – though in many cases without any repercussions, since their social position rendered them more legible to the authorities and thus less of a problem. Many *vermenn* travelled for the fishing season without ever acquiring passports – and mostly without any trouble, as we saw in the previous section. The vast archives of county magistrates contain frequent references to people travelling to distant regions without passports, with no mention of them being made to pay the fines dictated by law.[88] Ívar Jónsson from Skagafjarðarsýsla, for example, journeyed south to Gullbringusýsla in 1825 without a passport. When the magistrate inquired with the district governor whether he should bring charges against Ívar, the reply stated that since his trip had been short and he had already returned home, any charges against him should be dropped.[89]

Lack of a passport initially did not cause any problems for carpenter Páll Sigurðsson either when he arrived along with his girlfriend – both eloping from previous marriages – in Álftanes in Gullbringusýsla in 1817 to work for the local parish priest, Markús Magnússon (who was likewise discussed in the previous section). Once Páll got his girlfriend pregnant, however, their presence in the community raised the ire of the local police constables who, fearing the additional burden on the poor relief fund, ordered them to separate, as the law forbade unwed parents to reside within the same parish. They disobeyed and stayed, subsequently having another child. After some delay, they were finally put on trial in 1819 for violating the law of 1783 prohibiting masterless labour, at which point Páll's missing passport became a matter of some concern. In his argumentation during sentencing, the county magistrate stated – presumably in response to Páll's own testimony, which

87 On the concept of "slow violence" and its potential application for analysing social relations in historical context, see Geoff Ward, "The Slow Violence of State Organized Race Crime," *Theoretical Criminology* 19, no. 3 (2015): 299–314. The concept originates in environmental humanities, with its principal proponent Rob Nixon defining it as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight . . . that is dispersed across space and time . . . neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales." Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

88 See for example NAI. County magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla. GA/6–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1820–1823), 30.

89 NAI. County magistrate in Skagafjarðarsýsla. B/136. Amtsbréf um vegabréfslausa menn 1786–1825. Pro memoria signed by district governor G. Jónsson, 19 October 1825.

is unfortunately not included in the record – that it was "no excuse that he is a craftsman". While exempting craftsmen from the regulations on compulsory service, he argued, the decree forbidding masterless labour asserted that they were nonetheless required to obtain "a pass" from their local magistrate when moving to other counties for work, which Páll had failed to do.[90] This interpretation was upheld by the higher courts,[91] indicating that state officials may generally have understood the clause in the decree stating that craftsmen in the countryside were allowed to work "for the peasantry" for daily or weekly wages only if "they have been provided with a magistrate's attestation" as referring to a passport of sorts.[92]

This may explain why – despite intensive searches in various archives – we have been unable to find any indication that specific permits were issued during this period that allowed individuals to work as craftsmen, such as the permit letters (*lausamennskubréf*) issued after the revised legislation of 1863 allowed workers above a certain age to purchase them for a significant fee.[93] Instead, this may have been an arbitrary decision made by officials when issuing passports or in response to individual circumstances. In fact, the argumentation by the upper courts in Páll's case went even further by stating that Páll should be considered exempt from compulsory service since he was well known for his skills in carpentry, as the law stipulated that this applied to all persons "whose main occupation" was craftsmanship, regardless of whether they had a journeyman's certificate or not.[94] Other cases show that the economic value of individual craftsmen to local communities was deemed an essential precondition for obtaining a permit to work outside the compulsory service system – but also that it depended entirely on the discretion of the respective magistrate and the position of the worker in question within the local community.[95] Persons viewed as morally or socially

90 NAI. County magistrate in Gullbringu- and Kjósarsýsla. GA/4–2. Dómabók (1819–1832), 7–13.

91 *Landsyfirrjettardómar og hæstarjettardómar í íslenzkum málum 1802–1873* II: *1815–1824* (Reykjavík: Sögufjelag, 1919–1924), 175.

92 Stephensen and Sigurðsson, eds., *Lovsamling for Island* IV, 685.

93 For this article, we searched the correspondence books of the county magistrate of *Gullbringusýsla* for the periods 1791–1803 and 1824–1826 as well as the correspondence books of the chief of police in *Reykjavík* from 1803 to 1806. We have encountered no such documents in our years of archival research, although we have found various instances where magistrates temporarily resolved to allow a particular person to remain masterless until the next turnover period. Other scholars have likewise searched for permits issued to craftsmen after the introduction of the decree of 1783, with little success. See Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, "Samfélag átjándu aldar: Hugarfar, handverk og arfur fyrri alda," *Saga* 49, no. 1 (2011): 53–103, here 77–79. For further discussion of the changes to labour legislation in Iceland in the 1860s, see Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 178–179.

94 *Landsyfirrjettardómar* II, 175.

95 Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, 186–187.

questionable for whatever reason – like the itinerant worker Eiríkur Jónsson, "who calls himself a blacksmith"[96] – could not count on receiving such a permit regardless of their level of expertise.

Conclusion

Passports have a dual nature. They offer freedom of movement to those who possess them and thus facilitate mobility, and they simultaneously restrict movement by limiting the right to move to those who are able to lawfully acquire a passport from the relevant authorities, thereby rendering immobile those who are not. They also double as identification documents, making their bearers 'legible' to the authorities and thus traceable, accounted for, and ultimately governed. The same logic applies to the internal passports issued in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Iceland. As discussed in this chapter, they facilitated the organisation of seasonal labour mobility as well as functioning as an essential tool for a "mobility regime" that regulated not only who *could* move about in the country, and for what purposes, but also who was *forced* to move, since they served as a mechanism for removing undesirable people. The seemingly common disregard of these passport regulations by workers, employers, and even state officials, illustrates their limits as tools for labour coercion, however. Their implementation in Icelandic society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century clashed not only with long-standing cultural traditions of unhindered seasonal mobility and notions of hospitality, but also with the need for flexibility within an economy based so fundamentally on a mobile labour force and the fact that the country lacked the administrative infrastructure necessary to maintain such a coercive mode of surveillance and control. The use of passports was also appropriated for their own ends in some instances by the labouring poor, who – by procuring documentation through fraudulent means or making other illicit use of otherwise legal documents – turned this inherently invasive and coercive form of surveillance into a mechanism for subverting the mobility regime and evading or outright resisting the coercive labour legislation and its basic component of compulsory service for the labouring poor.

96 NAI. County magistrate in Húnavatnssýsla. GA/8–3. Dóma- og þingbók (1855–1860), 113.