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The Animal Heard

Soundscapes, sound-making, and animal-human relations in medieval Iceland

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The sounds of animals were key soundmarks in the agro-pastoral landscapes of medieval Iceland. The *Íslendingasögur* contain a number of episodes centred around the sound-making of domestic animals and the effects of listening to them. Drawing on a range of sources including saga literature, the archaeology of Viking age Iceland, and modern studies of animal behaviour and human-animal relations, it is suggested that such narratives may have developed from stories about how to work with animals used for teaching within communities. The article also recognises that animal and animal-like sounds have the potential to destabilise both the perceived safety of the house and the concept of the human-animal divide.

Introduction

The agro-pastoral communities of medieval Iceland lived within distinct soundscapes. Alongside the keynotes of wind, waterfalls, rivers, and the sea, these communities would have been constituted by the sounds of domestic animals: the lowing of cattle, snuffling of pigs, bleating of sheep and goats, whinnying of horses, and barking of dogs, as well as the sounds of birdlife and rodents. The presence of animals in medieval texts were rooted in experiences of being with them: experiences grounded in both hearing and listening that generated stories with both oral and aural roots.[1] This

[1] While the current author believes the animal-human interactions in these texts are rooted in aural experiences and oral storytelling, animals would not have been included in this storytelling tradition unless they were useful and entertaining parts of the narratives. The use of animals as methods of telling stories, and especially conveying a meaningful message echoes continental and classical fable traditions (Salisbury 1996; Heide 2022). The animal-sound episodes discussed in this chapter seem likewise to show animals as teachers, although here the focus is on interaction with the human and learning about the animal, rather than the animal interacting as a humanlike character revealing something about the human.

article seeks to understand which animal sounds are given narrative importance in the *Íslendingasögur* and what purposes these sounds appear to serve, both within and without the texts. At the same time, it asks why humans making animal-sounds appears as a repeated motif in these sagas, and whether animal-sound-making and human imitation of such are related in a wider context of understanding domestic animals. I will first discuss examples of animal sound-making and human understanding, before showing how the imitation of domestic animals we find in two sagas (*Njáls saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga*) draw on these animal episodes. I will finally focus on the house as a central figure in all the episodes discussed, and suggest that the location of the hearing, as well as the act that is heard, establish these episodes as teachable moments in embodied narratives.

Soundscapes and medieval Iceland

In Old Norse scholarship, discussion of soundscapes and the sounds of animals has been limited, and often focussed on birds, dogs, and wild animals.[2] The sounds of livestock animals are often absent from discussions of these texts, aside from analysis of descriptions of berserkers bellowing like bulls – yet on reading the *Íslendingasögur* specifically, it becomes clear that the sounds of livestock permeate and direct many more of the narratives than previously considered.[3] The *Íslendingasögur* are texts that were compiled in medieval Iceland from the thirteenth century onwards, but the narratives tell stories of Viking age Icelanders: their lives, their trials and tribulations, and their animals and farms. With their roots in oral narratives of earlier communities but compiled at a time of increasingly fluctuating climatic conditions and husbandry changes, these texts show how medieval Icelanders engaged with the past, retelling and recreating stories of humans, animals and their interactions with environments in a way that can be considered folkloric. The sagas both preserve and reshape tales with meanings that were necessarily of value to medieval compilers.[4] This article focuses on the *Íslendingasögur* because of their rooted nature in the Icelandic past and landscape.

[2] Rohrbach 2009; Bourns 2012; 2017: 225, 241; Evans Tang 2021; Bourns 2021a; Evans Tang 2022; 2023.

[3] While a greater number of publications on sound and animals are available for Old English texts, the focus still rests primarily on birds, following a pattern seemingly common across medieval studies: Gorst 2010; Steel 2010; Poole & Lacey 2014; Stanton 2015; Lacey 2016; Warren 2016; Stanton 2018; Warren 2018; Hooke and Bintley 2019; see Lewis 2022 for a comprehensive introduction to general work on medieval literature and sound.

[4] Cormack 2007; Hermann 2013; Lethbridge & Hartman 2016; Jesch 2018; Evans Tang 2022: 3–4; Evans Tang & Milek forthcoming.

Soundscapes are vibrant parts of living and storytelling in the past. The developing field of auditory archaeology, and subsequent rise in publications on sensory archaeology, emphasise that acoustic information is a key part of experience in the past, and that both sense of place and social relations within communities are formed in part from relationships between the human (and animal) body, acoustic information, and places.[5] In particular, any culture involving animal herding will rely on communication between humans and animals, manifested through music, song, and poetry, as well as engagement with the sounds of animals themselves, and the sounds of their interaction with landscape.[6] For our purposes, it is therefore important to recognise that the aural signatures of communities are key to unravelling the tangled web of interrelations between humans, their animals, and their places of interaction. The sounds, or noise, of the natural environment (for example rain, thunder, wind, waves) may be affected by the change of seasons or climate and form an ecological code for a community in a landscape (Krause & Farina 2016; Farina 2017). The sounds of livestock in early Iceland would likewise have formed part of this ecological code. This is not to say that these sonic phenomena in the landscape should be dismissed as background noise. Rather they are the sounds of living in a place, and, especially for communities working with the land and its inhabitants, would have made up a vital component of the knowledge required to survive and prosper in a specific environment. The sounds of animals, the environment, and the interaction of both may add the authenticity of the earwitness to saga narratives, but they also lie at the centre of their narrative episodes, conveying meaning to the characters and the audience through their similarity to the real-world soundscapes and animals with which those consuming these stories would be familiar.[7] Reviews of herding or farming practices, both in modern factory farms and traditional reindeer herding emphasise the vital importance of attending to animal sounds, on both a herd and individual level, for protection and welfare interests (Sara 2009; Olczak et al. 2023). It is therefore shortsighted to ignore the narrative responses and reactions to aural signatures that we find in stories in which animals feature.

The sounds of animals may have even acted like soundmarks, standing out in the soundscape and defining a farm or community (see Schafer 1993). The placenames in a community would absorb an aural quality: for example, a place called *sauðadalr* (sheep-valley), while referring to a valley in which sheep were kept, would have inevitably become a valley where sheep were heard, as the presence of the animal is in-

[5] Scarre 2006; Mills 2010; 2014; Hoaen 2019; Nyland 2019; Skeates & Day 2019.

[6] Ivarsdotter 2004; Sara 2009; Yoon 2018; Dettmann 2019.

[7] For the idea of the earwitness, see: Schafer 1993.

extricable from the sound of the animal.[8] In preliterate societies, the aural can be said to have precedence over the visual, and in oral storytelling, from which many of the saga narratives have their roots, the sounds of environments and actions play important roles (Schafer 1993; Hooke & Bintley 2019). A distinction should be made however, between a passive act of hearing and active, competent listening – that is of being actively open to the reception of sounds as well as able to understand what it is one is hearing (Pancer 2017: 434). In the *Íslendingasögur*, there is a distinction between those characters who hear the sounds of animals, and those who hear, listen, understand, and react correctly. As will be demonstrated in the following discussion, the misunderstanding of animal sounds often leads to death.

Animal Sound-Making in the *Íslendingasögur*

As part of the Cohabiting with Vikings project, a database was compiled of over 100 texts from across the Norse world, including sagas, poetry, laws, and travel accounts. All references to animals and their interactions with humans were tagged, resulting in over 10,500 references that can now be searched and queried. If these references are filtered by communication or sound, we find that the *Íslendingasögur* contain some of the noisiest animals across the corpus of Old Norse texts (only outstripped by the eddic poetry in terms of number of references to animal sound-making). Of the references to animal vocalisation in the *Íslendingasögur*, the references are overwhelmingly to the noises of cattle, with dogs also well represented (see Fig. 1).

Animal bodies are inherently noisy: the acts of eating, of being milked, of communicating with peers and humans, of moving and fighting, all generate noise. The sounds of animals therefore would be familiar to any who lived near and worked with them. In the *Íslendingasögur*, such intimacy seems most identified with cattle, and the range of words used to describe the sound-making of cattle are more extensive than any other animal in the *Íslendingasögur* (see Fig. 2).[9] Appropriately, discussion of the bull Glæsir from *Eyrbyggja saga*, makes up a large part of the discussion below, but the following sections also investigate the sound-making of four other animals from the *Íslendingasögur*: Sámr the dog (*Njáls saga*), Freyfaxi the horse (*Hrafnkels saga*) and Mókolla and Hǫsmagi the sheep (*Grettis saga*). It will consider the specific

[8] The sounds of animals were not experienced in a vacuum, and Poole and Lacey argue convincingly for the importance of aurality in bird place names in Early Medieval England (2014: 405) – although the relatively smaller sizes of birds than, for example, sheep, would mean that sound was likely a larger indicator for avian species than for the larger domestic herd animals, who would have been more visually prominent in the landscape.

[9] For a deeper discussion of human-cattle relations in early Iceland, see Evans Tang & Milek forthcoming.

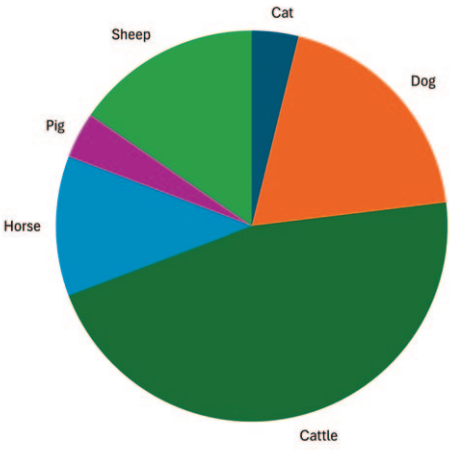

Fig. 1 Animal vocalising in the Sagas and Tales of Icelanders.

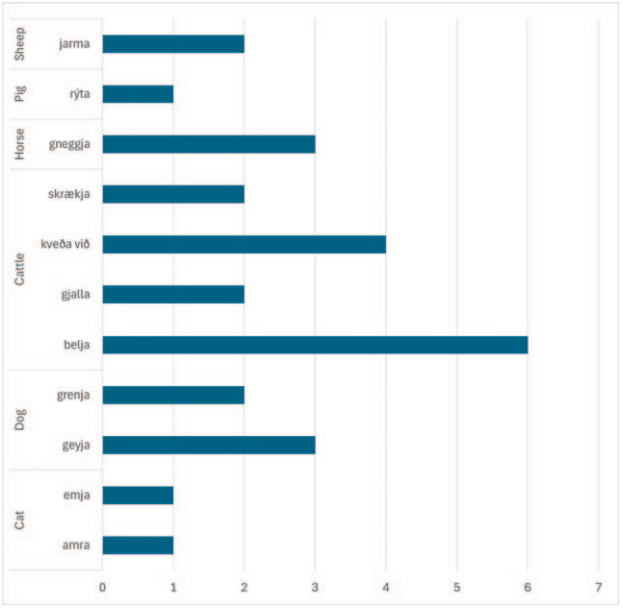

Fig. 2 Animal vocalisation words in the Sagas and Tales of Icelanders.

sounds made by these animals, the place and reception of the sound-making, and finally the outcome, perception, and meaning of such noises, especially in relation to two episodes of humans making animal sounds.

The cry of Sámr the dog is a suitable place to begin this discussion (see also the article by Eriksen in this special issue). Perhaps the most famous of all sounds made by animals in the *Íslendingasögur*, the cry of Sámr at his moment of death is notably not described as barking using *geyja* (to bark) but with *kveða við* (to cry out), a term used primarily for human speech, yet notably features in two of the animal episodes discussed here. Before analysing his death cry, we must first consider the nature of Sámr in life. This is a dog whose ability to listen and respond to human communication is emphasised, in a way otherwise seen in Freyfaxi the horse (discussed below). At his first introduction in the saga, Sámr's original owner, Ólafr, gifts him to Gunnarr with the words *Nú skaltú Gunnari fylgja ok vera honum slíkr sem þú mátt* ("Now you must accompany Gunnarr and be to him such as you are able") and *Sámr gekk þegar at Gunnari ok lagðisk niðr fyrir fœtr honum* (goes at once to Gunnarr and lays himself down at his feet) (*Njáls saga*, p. 173).[10] Later, the relationship between Sámr and his new owner, or human partner, is shown to be one of mutual understanding. When Sámr is killed we are told that *hundrinn kvað við hátt, svá at þat þótti með ódœmum* (the dog cried out loudly so that it seemed to them unprecedented) (*Njáls saga*, pp. 185–186). Gunnarr hears the cry from within the house, wakes, and is immediately warned of the impending attack. The note by the saga compiler that the cry of Sámr is unprecedented deserves further examination, and it must be highlighted that the cry seems unprecedented only to the listeners outside the house who have killed the dog. To Gunnarr, the cry is simply Sámr doing the expected, offering both a warning and a call to arms: *Gunnarr vaknaði í skálanum ok mælti: "Sárt ertú leikinn Sámr fóstri, ok búð svá sé til ætlat, at skammt skyli okkar í meðal"* (Gunnarr woke in the hall and said: "Painfully are you played with Sámr foster-kin, and it may be intended that a short time should be between us-two") (*Njáls saga*, p. 186). This episode strongly emphasises the difference between the two sets of men. The attackers can barely believe their ears, while Gunnarr knows exactly what the cry of his dog means.

Medieval philosophers were intensely interested in the question of sound and especially animal sounds.[11] One of the points of these debates rested on whether the meanings of these sounds were supplied by the emitter of the sound, such as intentionally indicating distress or joy, or the listener, who would interpret the sound based on human expectations (Eco et al. 1989: 8). The bark of the dog was especially de-

[10] All translations are the author's own unless otherwise specified.

[11] See Eco et al. 1989 for a comprehensive overview of the different scholastic debates.

bated: for Aquinas, the intentional way animals had of indicating such emotions was akin to the speech of man, but the bark rested halfway between intentional articulate speech and meaningless noise (Eco et al. 1989: 8). For Abelard, the bark of a dog had both intention and interpretation, and the interpretation of it would vary based on the listener's experience and circumstance – for example, a bark heard from far away would simply indicate the presence of a dog in a certain place; whereas if this bark is heard by someone who knows the dog, or is in close quarters with them, the interpretation may be more specific as to intention or meaning (Eco et al. 1989: 15). Perhaps most pertinent, Roger Bacon acknowledged that a man with training will understand animals, and that the understanding of the meaning of animal sounds can be learnt (Eco et al. 1989: 19–20). The question of learning the meaning of animal sounds raises further questions, as to who is doing the teaching, and what recognition of mutual learning is given. The twelfth-century history of the Danes, *Gesta Danorum* shows the emotions and inner lives of animals were recognised as things advantageous to understand, and heavily linked with their expression of sounds. In this text, we hear how a man receives "the most authoritative human wisdom" after a magical meal, which includes "understanding the speech of wild animals and cattle" so that he is able to "interpret the way animal noises conveyed sense and indicated particular feelings" (Saxo V.2.8).[12] In *Njáls saga*, the recognition of emotion, feeling, and intention, behind the cry of the dog sets Gunnarr apart as a man who understands the sounds of animals – or at least this one. Such men are marked out in the *Íslendingasögur*, although not always in positive ways.

As mentioned above, the verbal phrase *kveða við* is also used for the bull, Glæsir in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and like the cry of Sámr, the cry of the bull is interpreted differently by different listeners.

Glæsir's relationship to sound-making and place is key in his story. As a calf, Glæsir is brought into the *stofa* (living room) of the house, and it is said *kvað hann við hátt* (he cried out loudly) while bound on the floor, and *þá kvað kálfrinn við í annat sinn* (then the calf cried out a second time), after an old woman in the house objects to the cry, interpreting it as a *trolls læti* (a troll's sound) (*Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 171). It is not necessarily the specific nature of Glæsir's cry that marks the sound out as trollish,

[12] The understanding of animals (in this case birds) is also credited to the consumption of particular food in *Vǫlsunga saga* and eddic poetry, in which Sigurðr tastes the blood of Fáfnir and understands the speech of birds as a result. See Bourns 2021b: 213 for further discussion of this motif. The episode from *Gesta Danorum* is the only text in which understanding a domestic animal (cattle) is found, although Guðrún in *Guðrúnarkviða I* seems to have some sort of communication with her geese, and the prose introduction to the poem relates how she also tasted of Fáfnir's heart (*Guðrúnarkviða I*, pp. 331, 329).

as the old woman once again labels the bull monstrous once he has grown and has started to bellow (*belja*):

> Kálfr þessi óx dagvǫxtum, svá at um várit, er kálfar váru út látnir, þá var hann eigi minni en þeir, er alnir váru á ǫndverðum vetri; hann hljóp mikit í tǫðunni, er hann kom út, ok beljaði hátt, sem griðungr gylli, svá at gǫrla heyrði í hús inn. Þá mælti kerlingin:...Þat var þó, at trollit var eigi drepit" (*Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 172).

> This calf grew day-by-day, so that in the spring, when the calves were let out to graze, he was no smaller than those born in the first part of winter. When he was out, he ran much in the homefield, and bellowed loudly, like a bellowing bull, so that he was clearly heard in the house. Then the old woman said: "It seems the troll was not killed".

While the bull has moved from within the house to outside, his vocalisation is clearly heard within the building. The old woman's designation of his trollish nature does not seem reliant on the nature of the sound-making, except perhaps that he begins to bellow far sooner than the other calves, and therefore the timing of the sound is the issue. Indeed, the act of vocalising in an unexpected context, specifically bellowing, causes humans to be also labelled transgressive: bellowing like a bull is an act ascribed to berserkers (Bourns 2017: 225; 2021a: 644; Dale 2021: 26, 41–47). However, it might be that the fear of Glæsir's bellowing is rooted in the old woman's lack of familiarity with bulls. Vocalisation is a specific feature of grown bulls, but not all early Icelandic farms may have kept them, and so the seemingly incessant noise of this animal taken by the old woman to be trollish, may simply show the sound of a bull at a farm not used to keeping one (McCooey 2017: 87).

Bourns has suggested that the story of Glæsir is a perversion of the natural order, where the bull moves from domestic to wild in stages as he grows up (Bourns 2021a: 636). I find it fascinating then that this potential movement seems characterised both by movements in space (from house, to homefield, to eventual wild), but also by changes in sound:

> Þá er Glæsir var fjǫgurra vetra gamall, gekk hann eigi undan konum, bǫrnum eða ungmennum, en ef karlar gengu at honum, reigðisk hann við ok lét ótrúliga, en gekk undan þeim í þraut. Þat var einn dag, er Glæsir kom heim á stǫðul, at hann gall ákafliga hátt, at svá gǫrla heyrði inn í húsin, sem hjá væri (*Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 172–173).

> When Glæsir was four-winters old, he went away from the women, children and young men, and if old men went to him, he showed his displeasure and made threatening noises, and eventually escaped from them. One day, when Glæsir came home to the milking-pen he screamed vehemently loudly, so that he was fully heard in the houses that were nearby.

As Glæsir ages then, he moves from bellowing to screaming, accompanied by a change in body language. Where once Glæsir had been the friendliest and calmest of animals to have around the milking pen and the homefield, he has now changed, and his final vocalisation of the story is yet another change: to a *skræk mikinn* (great shriek) (*Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 175; Evans Tang 2022: 200–202). These changes in sound and behaviour, while seeming to show a movement from tame to wild, may show the result of ignoring specific markers in the animal. Bulls were dangerous animals, and careful attention needed to be paid to their temperament and behaviour (Bouissou et al. 2001: 116; Moran & Doyle 2015: 53, 45). The escalation of the noise, from crying out, to bellowing, to shrieking may also be read as communicating increasing stress or pain, which when ignored may explain his later violent behaviour. As a result of this change in behaviour, the householder and the bull fight – and the householder is killed. Evidently listening and responding to animals correctly was vital for secure animal-human relationships on the farm.

An example of a man who understands the sound of his horse, and who can make himself understood to him is Hrafnkell in *Hrafnkels saga*. Hrafnkell is the owner of a beloved horse, Freyfaxi, with whom he is depicted as having a relationship of mutual understanding. Hrafnkell vows early in the saga that no one should ride Freyfaxi without his permission; when a man Hrafnkell hires to watch his sheep does so, and after being ridden hard all day in search of sheep, the horse has a dramatic, noisy, response:

> Hestrinn hleypr ofan eptir dalnum ok nemr eigi stað, fyrri en hann kemr á Aðalból. Þá sat Hrafnkell yfir borðum. Ok er hestrinn kemr fyrir dyrr, hneggjaði hann þá hátt. Hrafnkell mælti við eina konu, þá sem þjónaði fyrir borðinu, at hon skyldi fara til duranna, því at hross hneggjaði, – "ok þótti mér líkt vera gnegg Freyfaxa." Hon gengr fram í dyrrnar ok sér Freyfaxa mjǫk ókræsiligan. Hon sagði Hrafnkeli, at Freyfaxi var fyrir durum úti, mjǫk óþokkuligr. "Hvat mun garprinn vilja, er hann er heim kominn?" segir Hrafnkell. "Eigi mun þat góðu gegna." Síðan gekk hann út ok sér Freyfaxa ok mælti við hann: "Illa þykki mér, at þú ert þann veg til gǫrr, fóstri minn, en heima hafðir þú vit þitt, er þú sagðir mér til, ok skal þessa

> hefnt verða. Far þú til liðs þíns." En hann gekk þegar upp eptir dalnum til stóðs sins (*Hrafnkels saga*, p. 104).
>
> The horse ran down into the valley and stopped at no place before he came to Aðalból, where Hrafnkell sat at the table. And when the horse came in front of the door, then he neighed loudly. Hrafnkell said to a woman who served him at the table, that she should go to the door, because a horse neighed, "and it seemed to me likely to be the neighing of Freyfaxi." She went to the door and saw Freyfaxi in a very poor state. She said to Hrafnkell that Freyfaxi was outside the door, greatly ill-favoured. "What will the bold one want, that he has come home?" said Hrafnkell. "It will signify nothing good." Then he went outside and saw Freyfaxi and said to him: "Bad it seems to me, that you have been treated in this way, my foster-kin; but you had your wits about you when you told this to me, and this shall be avenged. You should go to your followers." And Freyfaxi went from there up into the valley to his stud-mares.

In this episode, Freyfaxi seems to report his mistreatment at the hands of the shepherd to his human partner, and likewise understands Hrafnkell's request for him to return to his herd.[13] The similarity in response between Gunnarr and Hrafnkell at these moments of animal sound-making cannot, and indeed has not been ignored, but what has yet to attract attention is the specific act of hearing, and hearing within the house (Bourns 2021a: n. 7; Evans Tang 2022: 142–159). Like Gunnarr and the men and women in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Hrafnkell first hears the animal from inside the house, recognises the sound of the individual animal, and notably responds promptly – and accurately – to the noise. As the episodes of human imitation of animals discussed below will suggest, the hearing of animal sounds outside comes with an expectation of a human response from within the house.

Understanding of animal sounds can also be a skill that is gained over time – and the depiction of the development of this as a result of close animal-human interactions can be found in *Grettis saga*:

> En ær mókollótt var þar með dilki, sú er honum þótti mest afbragð í vera fyrir vaxtar sakar. Var honum forvitni á at taka dilkinn, ok svá gerði hann ok skar síðan dilkinn; [...]. En er Mókolla missti dilks síns, fór hon upp á skála Grettis hverja nótt ok jarmaði, svá at hann mátti enga nótt sofa; þess iðraðisk hann mest, er hann hafði dilkinn skorit, fyrir ónáðum hennar (*Grettis saga*, p. 200).

[13] For a further discussion of Freyfaxi as a legal actor, see Evans Tang & Ruiter 2023.

> But a ewe with a dusky head was there with a sucking-lamb, and that ewe seemed to him most excellent with respect to stature. It was to him a matter of curiosity to take the lamb, and so he did and afterwards slaughtered the lamb; […]. But when Mókolla missed her lamb, she went up onto the hut of Grettir each night and bleated, so that he was not able to sleep at night; this he repented most, that he had slaughtered the lamb, because of her disturbances.

Here the saga compiler depicts a ewe so distraught by the loss of her lamb, that she will not allow Grettir to sleep by continuously bleating at him. While Grettir's childhood was characterised by a deliberate desire to disassociate from and disfigure animals, he is shown to be capable of learning (Poole 2004: 11; Ranković 2009: 798; Evans Tang 2021; 2022: 164–178). At this point in the saga, an outlaw and alone, Grettir is depicted as understanding both the reasoning for the ewe's vocalisation and potentially feeling sorry for the animal as well as for himself (Evans Tang 2022: 177). Once again, we see the animal, makeshift house, and human in a relationship tied up by the sound of the animal.

The sound-making of sheep returns to Grettir just before his final fight on the island of Drangey:

> Svá er sagt, at þá er Grettir hafði tvá vetr verit í Drangey, þá hǫfðu þeir skorit flest allt sauðfé þat, sem þar hafði verit; en einn hrút létu þeir lifa, svá at getit sé; hann var hǫsmǫgóttr at lit ok hyrndr mjǫk. At honum hendu þeir mikit gaman, því at hann var svá spakr, at hann stóð fyrir úti ok rann eptir þeim, þar sem þeir gengu. Hann gekk heim til skála á kveldin ok gneri hornum sínum við hurðina (*Grettis saga*, p. 237).

> So, it is said, that when Grettir had been two winters on Drangey, then they had slaughtered almost all the sheep that had been there; but they let one ram live, as is spoken of; he was grey-bellied and greatly horned. They took great delight in him because he was so calm, and he stood outside of the door and ran after them as they walked there. He went home to the hut in the evening and rubbed his horns against the door.

This ram, named Hǫsmagi by Grettir's younger brother in a later episode, does not speak with a voice or vocal expression, but rather uses his body to make his sound, rubbing his horns against the door. The sound is explicitly highlighted in Grettir's final fight, when Grettir and Illugi hear knocking on the door, and Illugi quips: *Knýr*

Hǫsmagi hurð, bróðir (Hǫsmagi knocks on the door, brother) (*Grettis saga*, p. 359). Except, this time it is not the sheep but their enemies, who eventually enter the house via the roof and kill Grettir. It is possible that the men outside the house are attempting to imitate the familiar actions of the ram, and that Illugi's comment, rather than an attempt at gallows humour likening the knocking of enemies to the friendly sheep, is indeed an honest mistake, and the men outside have successful imitated their target.

Human-animal sound-making

The recognition of embodied animal sounds, and the ability of men to successfully imitate these is found elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur*, in episodes from *Njáls saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga* in which men imitate the embodied sound-making of animals to influence those within the house. It seems, from the episodes discussed above, that the human hearing the animal outside from within the house was a key part of these mini-narratives; so much so, that other storytellers could play with this motif for dramatic effect. In *Heiðarvíga saga*, in an aim to lure a man out of bed and into an ambush, Snorri goði gives the instruction to pull at the grass of the turf house *líka sem hestr bíti* (like a horse might graze) (*Heiðarvíga saga*, p. 248). The sound is heard and understood as horses by the intended target, and while the man inside the house twice gives the order of driving the horses away to a boy, both times the lad falls asleep. Only the third time he hears the noise does the man get up and investigate, leading to his ambush and death:

> Þorsteinn vaknar ok kallar til smalapiltsins ok segir, hann muni of skammt hafa rekit hestana frá í gærkveldi, ok skuli hann fara at reka pá. [...] Enn heyrir Þorsteinn, at eitthvat nagar þekjuna, kallar aptr til piltsins, en hann sofnar aptr. Ferr þá Þorsteinn á fætr út at forvitnask um þetta [...] Í því bili hlaupa þeir Snorri at honum (*Heiðarvíga saga*, p. 248).

> Thorstein wakes and calls to the sheep-boy and says, he must have driven the horses only a short distance away the evening before, and he should go drive them away. [...] Again, Þorsteinn hears that something gnaws on the roof, calls again to the boy, but he again sleeps. Then Þorsteinn gets up and goes out to investigate [...] In that moment Snorri and his men leapt at him.

While it might be said that the laziness of the boy contributes to his householder's demise, it is also the misunderstanding of the noise that does so. A similar event occurs in *Njáls saga*, in which Skarpheðinn Njálsson successfully imitates the sound of a grazing sheep:

> Skarpheðinn hleypr á hús upp ok reytti gras, ok ætluðu þeir, er inni váru, at fénaðr væri. Tók Starkaðr ok Þorgeirr, vápn sín ok klæði ok fóru út ok hljópu upp um garðinn; en er Starkaðr sá Skarpheðinn, hræddisk hann ok vildi aptr snúa. Skarpheðinn høggr hann við garðinum (*Njáls saga*, p. 195).
>
> Skarpheðinn leapt up on the house and pulled at the grass, and those who were inside thought that it was the animals. Starkaðr and Þorgeirr took their weapons and clothes, went out and leapt up over the wall; and when Starkaðr saw Skarpheðinn he was afraid and wanted to turn back. Skarpheðinn struck him by the wall.

Skarpheðinn and Högni have just completed an attack at a farm in which they effectively utilised the sound of actual animals (driving livestock down towards the farm and ambushing the men when they came out to shoo the animals away), but this second attack is more emphatically focussed on the embodied act of sound-making.[14] This episode explicitly connects the sound of Skarpheðinn's action with the reaction of the men inside the house: the hypervigilance of the men inside, listening out for any disturbance, leads them to their deaths – and yet, had they been able to properly distinguish between animal and human-animal sounds, they may have not fallen for the trick. Evidently, Skarpheðinn's understanding of animal sound-making is too good, and the imitation is performed perfectly.

Listening from within the house

Stories of animal-human interactions, animal sound-making and human imitation of such would have held additional layers of meaning to those who lived and worked with animals; and so, these episodes prompt the question: why is hearing the animal in these texts so exclusively presented as an inner-house experience? Soundscapes play a formative role in how places, persons, and interactions are remembered across the landscape, so why do these episodes focus so closely on the farm? Perhaps because this is where the activity happens: both in terms of the saga narrative and everyday life. Living on a medieval farm would have been a noisy affair, and the farm area a place of intense activity involving humans, things, and animals.

The animal and human places could be very closely entangled on early Icelandic farms. Take for example, Sveigakot: an early farm in Mývatnsveit in the north of Iceland. Figure 3 shows the plan of the farm, with structure S7, a multi-functional

[14] *Njáls saga*, p. 195. For a more detailed discussion of this episode, see Evans Tang forthcoming.

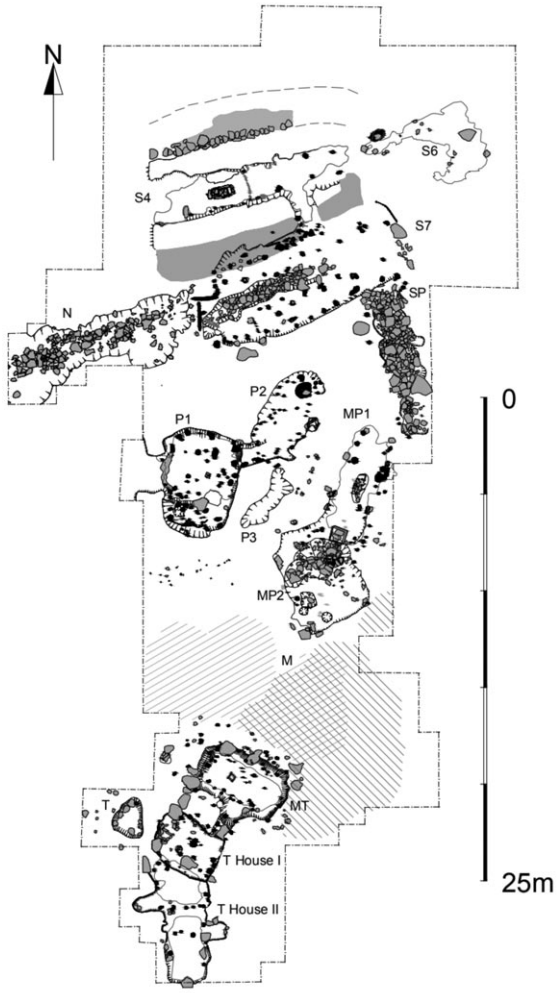

Fig. 3 Site plan of the Viking-age (and medieval) site at Sveigakot. The building labelled S7 is a multi-functional building likely used both for animal-stalling and storage and variously for other purposes such as metal-working. The structures labelled P1, MP1 and MP2 were likely used as human dwellings, with P2 interpreted as an outside activity area. Image provided by and used with permission from Orri Vésteinsson.

animal byre and workspace the largest structure in the earliest phases of the site, before the construction of a later longhouse-style dwelling S4 adjacent to the ruins of the byre.[15]

Around S7 are a cluster of human dwellings (including P1), closely connected both by walkways and line of sight to this animal structure (Evans Tang 2022: 83–84, 86–87, 89–100). This is a site at which, at least in its earlier phases, encountering and hearing animals would have been unavoidable: the byre was a multi-purpose building in which humans and animals would have regularly and meaningfully mixed, with further possible evidence of pig-keeping around these buildings.[16] While Sveigakot is only one possible formation of a Viking age farm, it offers a glimpse into the possible entanglements of sounds and sights between humans and animals in such places. The structures of farms did change over time (as mentioned above, at Sveigakot dramatically so, see also Evans Tang 2022: 96), and the animals with whom relationships were built would have changed too, as numbers of sheep increased, and goats and pigs declined; nonetheless, the importance of animal care remained, and animals were unlikely to have been far enough away to exclude their sound-making from the farm site.[17] Variation in farm organisation is evident even in the sagas, with byres and animals placed at varying distances from the farmhouse. While no saga seems to explicitly depict an arrangement of animals and humans in the same living space, the descriptions in *Valla-Ljóts saga* (p. 250) and *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (p. 53) of there being *innangengt* (a thoroughfare) from within the byre, may suggest either a conjoined house and byre, or a passage house (*ganghús*) of the type that develops in later medieval Iceland (Evans Tang & Milek forthcoming; Vidal 2013: 102). In *Gísla saga* the byre is explicitly set in opposition to the *mannhús* (human dwelling area). The designation of human space in this way may have been especially important when an animal space (byre) was so close.

As highlighted above, the sagas, compiled in manuscripts from the thirteenth century onwards, are not products of the Viking age, but the stories they are telling are recreating their own Viking age pasts for the entertainment of the medieval audience – and perhaps their education. The representation of the house as a place of listening

[15] More examples of entangled human and animal spaces can be seen in the houses at Aðalstræti and Hrísbrú. See Evans Tang & Milek forthcoming.

[16] It is also possible that the farm at Vatnsfjörður organised itself in such a way as to balance the noises of animal-keeping, with the suggested byres placed at opposite ends of the farm site with their entrances looking outwards. See Evans Tang 2022: 87–88, 89–100.

[17] See Evans Tang 2022: 89–100 for further discussion of the effect on farm organisation on animal-human relationships and the transition from Viking age to medieval farms in Iceland.

in the *Íslendingasögur* should be considered intrinsic to such stories: this is where animals were heard, and would continue to be heard, and these stories tell us why *listening* within the house, not just hearing, was important. These sagas would likely have been told within the house, and therefore the focus on hearing animals from inside places may have been a trope that held educational meaning and significance for the listeners – listeners both to the narrative and to the sounds of the farm outside. Such an activity may have been especially significant in times of darkness. In the Icelandic winter, with many hours of daytime darkness, the need to be acutely attuned to the sounds of animals would have been vital. In the house, out of sight of your animals, would have been when humans needed to be listening the hardest.

Rather than being a safe place, being within the house, and therefore having your sense of sight restricted, makes you vulnerable in the *Íslendingasögur*. Gunnarr keeps having to expose himself to get a clear shot when his enemies are attacking him; and houses can be surrounded, deconstructed, and even burned.[18] Furthermore, the human is vulnerable in more ways than one. While the placement of the listener within the house and the animal without might seem to act as a dividing line between animal and human space, such a dichotomy is blurred by the permeability of the turf-house. Rather than being a secure, human haven from the animal space of the outside, the houses and shelters in these texts let the sound in, and in places even seem to serve as conduits, amplifying the sounds of animals and animal-like sounds. Likewise, the stability of the category 'human' is rendered fragile by the ability of the human to imitate the animal so successfully, disrupting the safety of an animal-human boundary in the body, as well as in the built environment. Given the vulnerability associated with such circumstances, it is unsurprising then that these episodes of animals and animal-like sounds being heard within the house are fraught with risk. Sámr's cry is the result of an attack and prefigures the destruction of Gunnarr and his house; Freyfaxi's neighing reports a crime but leads to death and exile for his human partner; Glæsir's bellowing leads to the death of the householder, Hǫsmagi's knocking foreshadows the invasion of Grettir's hut, and human imitation of grazing animals leads to ambush and manslaughter. Only Mókolla's bleating seems relieved from imminent danger, although it is an episode that may have had a more introspective effect on Grettir's psyche: a reminder that animals were persons with emotions too.

Conclusions

It is clear in these narrative episodes that the human voice is not the only sound to which one should listen, and a cultural understanding of animals allows us to more

[18] For an analysis of Gunnarr's death scene see, Evans Tang 2023.

thoroughly understand the sounds woven into these texts. Men failing to correctly interpret animal sound-making leads to problems, and multispecies mutual understanding of sounds is presented as perfectly possible. These episodes clearly acknowledge the agency or intention of the dog, cattle, horse, and sheep to alert humans to a specific act or circumstance; how the humans acted was up to them. But what is clear, is that these noisy animals are subjects of their narratives, requiring attention to be paid to them. The example of Sámr and his *manns vit* (human understanding) (*Njáls saga*, p. 173), shows that human understanding was not reliant on the capacity for human speech. These animals may not have had human words, but they were depicted as capable of intelligent and emotional communication in various ways.

For medieval Icelandic audiences, whose lives were entangled with the sounds of the farm, the cry of the bull, the bleat of the sheep and the neigh of the horse were recognisable, knowable sounds, so the inclusion of these in the *Íslendingasögur* may have helped to keep the stories engaging and alive. But everyday sounds were meaningful and understanding them was necessary. In showing the value of understanding animal communication – and the risks of misunderstanding it – the retelling and inclusion of these episodes may have had an educational, or at least cautionary angle. Stories are a useful technique in passing knowledge from one generation to the next, or between experienced farmworkers and those new to a role. I would not say that these sagas should necessarily be considered as consciously partaking in such a regime of knowledge sharing, but the stories behind them may have been, and show a society invested in caring for their animals and in training others – perhaps children – in this work. It should be noted however, that the compilers of the *Íslendingasögur* did not always see experienced human-animal interactions behind these narratives, with stories of animal sound-making sometimes placed into supernatural or paranormal contexts.[19]

Teaching through stories is a plausible act for a preliterate society such as early Iceland, as stories would form around animals and the places in which animals and humans interacted, then be passed on (Hadjielias et al. 2021: 280; Evans Tang 2022: 212). Such stories are most likely to be told about animals with whom work was undertaken, or with whom the closest intimacy was experienced; and these would likewise be the animals for whom such teachings were especially valuable: the horse, the canine companion, the ewe with lamb, or the potentially dangerous bull or ram. Stories about animals were likely to be retold across generations because people who work with animals talk about them, with the purpose both of entertainment and of

[19] For example, Glæsir is labelled trollish, and Freyfaxi is described as half-dedicated to Freyr, a divine association that is taken by some to explain his behaviour; see Miller 2017.

knowledge sharing within families and communities, facilitating interpretations of past actions, and guiding future ones (White & Meehan 1993: 31; Campbell 2009: 244).

We may therefore rethink the animal episodes in these sagas and the animal subjects at their centre, not just as background, or ways to show character or plot development in human stories, but as parts of stories actively for those caring for animals. Episodes such as the those discussed above seem to centre the animal experience and provide advice around how to practise good animal care, and at their core show animal-human interactions that recognise the importance of listening to animals, working with animal agency, prioritising animal knowledge, and benefitting from mutual interspecies learning, especially around animal suffering and the correct reading of animal behaviour.

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