Saga characters often exercised the option of fostering their children. This meant that a portion of the responsibilities of parenthood were delegated to people who were not the child’s biological parents. Although at times it might appear that fosterage was a haphazard practice, with children being relocated from the natal household at the whim of biological parents, this was not the case. Fosterage was systemized, regulated by tradition and law. In most cases, children who were sent away for fosterage were not unwanted, unloved, nor discarded. They were highly esteemed, valued members of both their biological family and their foster-family. Viewing fosterage as a consistent system, however, is challenging. The form of its practice suggests a pattern; but the pattern is neither simple nor immediately obvious. Although in its most basic sense, fosterage was the rearing of a child away from its natal household, copious examples belie this definition. A number of children, such as Egill in *Egils saga* and Hallgerðr in *Njáls saga*, have foster-parents, even though they were reared in their natal homes. The sagas, therefore, portray a variety of fostering practices. However, this is not evidence to suggest that Icelanders disregarded the laws pertaining to fosterage and sent their children to whomever for whatever reason. Rather, it shows that the perceived model of parenthood, which included a number of parenting options, was complex.

It is my aim in this paper to make sense of fosterage as it is represented in the sagas by suggesting that the sagas actually reflect a number of different parenting practices which were generally categorised as fosterage. The Icelandic lawcode *Grágás* is useful as a guide for differentiating these different parenting practices. Laws remained a valuable component in the regulation of activity in the Icelandic Commonwealth.
from the tenth century onwards. It was at this time that laws were imported from Norway and modified to suit the needs of medieval Icelanders. Although initially transmitted orally, a decision to codify the laws was made in 1117. The most complete versions extant have been preserved in two manuscripts: Konungsbók, dated around 1260; and Staðarhólsbók, dated around 1280. Thus the extant manuscripts of Grágás preserve versions of the law that were current at the time of saga-writing. Although it would be wrong to regard the extant laws as definitive, they do offer a viable guide to the mindset in which saga-characters performed their activities and, as such, offer a valuable means of understanding cultural practices. In this paper, I will use Grágás as a guide, to separate, delineate and re-label two parenting practices which are regulated closely by the law: legal fosterage and guardianship. I will then compare them, in order to show that an understanding of the nuances of the Icelandic model of parenthood guided by the law underlies the descriptions of child-rearing in the sagas.

Fosterage has been the focus of much previous scholarship. Its influence on family life was recognised early, and the important role it played in the weaving of social ties has been acknowledged continuously ever since. In the most detailed analyses of fosterage to date, its heterogeneity has been examined. So, for example, Gert Kreutzer considers fosterage to be the composite of a number of different childcare practices, and William Ian Miller distinguishes ‘several types of fostering arrangements’. Fosterage, therefore, is a combination of a number of different parenting practices, which makes it difficult to define precisely. To illustrate this point, it is useful to examine the sagas more closely. An almost textbook example of fosterage is the fostering

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3 Ari Þorgilsson, Íslendingabók in Íslendingabók. Landnámabók ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavík, 1968), ch. 2.
4 Íslendingabók, ch. 10.
7 Jesse L. Byock, Feud in the Icelandic Saga (Berkeley, 1982).
8 Gert Kreutzer, Kindheit Und Jugend in Der Altnordischen Literatur (Münster, 1987), ch. 7.