‘SPOILING THEM ROTTEN?’:
GRANDMOTHERS AND FAMILIAL IDENTITY IN
TWELFTH- AND THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ICELAND

Philadelphia Ricketts

In Iceland in 1202 Þuríðr Gizurardóttir offered to foster her favoured
daughter’s eldest son, Tumi Sighvatsson, who was four.* Íslendinga saga
tells us that Þuríðr and her second husband Sigurðr Ormsson loved the
boy very much.¹ There is concrete evidence of their care and concern
for Tumi: a few years later, Tumi’s foster-father Sigurðr was given some
chieftaincies, which he transferred to his foster-son Tumi.²

Tumi was not Þuríðr’s only grandchild to live with her and Sigurðr.
Her younger son Arnórr’s two daughters were also living at her residence
in 1203 while they were very young.³ It seems that Arnórr was still less
than twenty-one, was married and was living elsewhere, although he
was often with his stepfather Sigurðr. From the wording of the saga,
it is clear that Sigurðr was acting very like a father and mentor. His
ever stepson Kolbeinn was already a chieftain, and Sigurðr and Þuríðr
had done all they could to further Kolbeinn’s power and prestige.⁴
Sigurðr was now training his younger stepson, Arnórr, for the role of
chieftain as well.⁵ It is possible that Þuríðr had taken in Arnórr’s young
daughters and her young grandson Tumi in an effort to continue her
role as mentor to following generations, while her son Arnórr’s training
continued with her husband and elder son.

So what does this information tell us about Þuríðr as grandmother
and her identity as such, that is, about Þuríðr’s sense of herself as a

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¹ Sturlunga saga, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson et al., 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1946), I, p. 239, ch. 13. (Hereafter cited as SS.)
² SS, I, p. 243, ch. 18.
⁴ SS, I, pp. 155–57, ch. 28; p. 164, ch. 3; pp. 234–35, ch. 6; p. 239, ch. 13. For a
discussion of this point, see Philadelphia Ricketts, ‘Property, Power and Identity: a Study
of Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Widows in Iceland and Yorkshire’ (unpublished
grandmother and the importance of that role to her? First, it shows that Þuríðr and her second husband actively promoted the material interests of at least one grandson. Second, it seems to show that her household acted as a focal point for her grandchildren, both sons’ and daughters’ children, or at least for some of them for a part of their lives. Third, it strongly suggests that Þuríðr felt a bond with some of her grandchildren, which was perhaps intensified by their communal residence. One major question that this vignette raises, however, is, ‘Was Þuríðr a typical medieval Icelandic grandmother, typical in her concern for her grandchildren, in their residence with her, and in her involvement in their upbringing and their futures?’

The question is not, perhaps, as straightforward as one might anticipate. In this article, associations and contact between grandmothers and their grandchildren in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland (i.e., the later Commonwealth period) will be examined. But, as Joel Rosenthal has noted, links between members of the first and third generations are hard to track and assess for the medieval period, especially in relation to grandmothers. To determine interaction and affection—and thus a grandmother’s family role, her identity and personal bonds with grandchildren—is often even more difficult. Furthermore, the historiography of medieval grandmothers is very limited. Apart from Rosenthal’s useful contributions, no other substantial work has been undertaken on the subject, and no work has been carried out on medieval Icelandic grandmothers.

That is not to say that grandmothers and their contribution to family and society were unimportant. There are many reasons why these women and their familial role are hard to identify, not least due to the types of sources available, the kinds of activities which the women were involved in, and the interests of those who recorded events. We are particularly fortunate when examining grandmothers in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland, at least in comparison with other regions. The main source which provides an insight into Icelandic society of the later Commonwealth period is the contemporary sagas. As a reasonably