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FILOLOGIA GERMANICA – GERMANIC PHILOLOGY

Supplemento 2 (2021)

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Incantesimi e formule magiche nella tradizione manoscritta germanica medievale  
Charms and Magic Formulas in the Medieval Germanic Manuscript Tradition

Filologia Germanica – Germanic Philology

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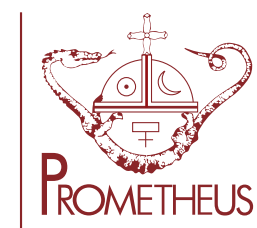
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**FILOLOGIA GERMANICA – GERMANIC PHILOLOGY**

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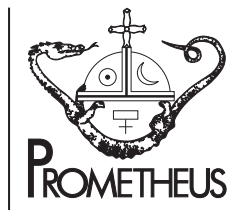
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MARIA CRISTINA LOMBARDI

THE COLIC LEAF:  
AN ICELANDIC CHARM AND AMULET

Runic amulets were used all over Scandinavia during the Middle Ages in order to prevent or cure illnesses as well as discover thieves or murderers and sometimes ward off evil forces looming over human beings. After Christianity had come to Scandinavia, runic amulets, very common in pagan times, continued to be carved and hung around the neck or other parts of the body according to the type of negative influence one was affected by. Colic leaves appeared in Iceland as parchment layers used for the same purpose. They contained texts, written in the Latin alphabet, showing a mixture of pagan and Christian elements. Our paper aims to show the dependence of these kinds of pendants on runic amulet practice by analysing the only extant Icelandic Colic leaf, ms. Lbs fragm. 14, preserved in the National University Library of Iceland, in Reykjavík.

1. *Introduction*

The use of magic rune carvings and other types of charms for healing is a popular theme in Old Norse literature. Magical runes for curing illnesses are described in Eddic poems (*Sigdrífumál*) and sagas (i.e. the famous example in *Egils saga*). Egill Skallagrímsson, the skald, comes to visit Helga, a Swedish peasant girl who is sick and has lost her mind, bewitched by a misapplied runic spell. A young man, not expert in rune carving, who was in love with her and wanted to conquer her love, had carved runes on a piece of whalebone placed in the girl's bed, but the wrong sequence had caused Helga's illness to get worse and worse. After realizing that the runes were miscarved, Egill burnt the bone and placed a new runic inscription under her pillow. The girl recovered immediately.<sup>1</sup>

A mixture of beliefs of different origin is commonplace in medieval and post-medieval Nordic charms, many of which, although written in Christian times, contain pagan elements. After Christianity had come to Scandinavia, rune-carving for healing purposes did not stop but continued for a long time as proved by many inscriptions on various objects, although carving was replaced more and more by writing on vellum.

<sup>1</sup> Guðni Jónsson 1933, 230.



In the Colic leaf, the Icelandic folk name of which is *Kveisublaðið*, the old magic (although it does not employ runic letters) and the new Christian healing practice were combined to produce a vellum amulet, written in Latin characters, where different languages and traditions were joined to enhance the efficacy of the charm.

As other sorts of amulets and talismans, Colic leaves were vellum strips which were tied to the sick person's neck or thigh, depending on the type of illness. They are considered to have been quite common in Iceland, although they were forbidden and confiscated at the time of the witch hunts of the seventeenth century. Legal documents of cases brought against the authors of Colic leaves provide evidence of their use in Iceland and of the fate attending their authors at the time of persecution. However, it has been surmised that such practice would date from the fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

The Colic leaf under examination features a variety of strategies to put into practice in order to achieve the intended result. The spirit of sickness is directly addressed and banished by means of formulas like 'go away', 'I'll kill you', and by seeking help from a number of supernatural Christian intercessors. The leaf contains a prayer-exorcism and, according to Jonathan Roper's classification,<sup>3</sup> as far as its general purpose is concerned, it belongs to the type of 'healing charm', its specific purpose being that of healing colic, gout, and arthritis.

As already mentioned, the importance of this fragment (Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn, Lbs fragm. 14) lies in the fact that it is the only extant exemplar of this kind in our possession. Due to its length and complexity, my article will only consider some parts of its text.

## 2. *Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn, Lbs fragm. 14*

The text of this charm is a 'patchwork', made up of different components collected from heterogeneous sources. Besides narrative parts, it contains a few expressions originated from corruptions of foreign phrases and words, consequently lacking a comprehensible logical meaning, mostly relying on euphonic effects and on the belief that such sequences had a mystical meaning. The use of foreign words (Greek and Hebrew names of divinities) has a long tradition behind it, with its roots in Gnosticism which, by stressing

<sup>2</sup> See the introduction of Magnús Már Lárusson 1951-52, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Roper 2005, 57-59.

supernatural name power and mystical associations of letters, had influenced European magic and superstition, reaching as far as Scandinavia.<sup>4</sup>

The strip hosts Christian benedictions, prayers, and fragments of biblical episodes as well as names and epithets of God, as well as allusions to medieval popular forms of spirituality like ‘Christ’s five wounds’. It also hides traces of a pagan exorcism deeply embedded in its structure and surrounded by a solid Christian frame.

Similar exorcisms using both pagan invocations and biblically based *historiolae* have been known since the fourteenth century. Texts reporting the story of the raising of Lazarus or the healing of the leper or other miracles worked by Christ to be worn as amulets have been found in papyri buried with Egyptian mummies.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in such a syncretism, we must distinguish and discuss a manifold variety of elements. This peculiar mixture – where components are different in quantity and quality – needs to be carefully investigated and analysed.

Lbs fragm. 14, dating from around 1600, is a vellum strip preserved in the National University Library of Iceland which has become dark and obscure over time. It is 58.4 cm long x 10 cm wide. Writing is found on both sides of the vellum, covering the whole leaf. There is a 9-cm gap at the top before the text begins. There are two holes on the parchment, which has been damaged in several points, so that the letters are somewhat indistinct and, in some places, illegible. Moreover, a few words seem to have been deliberately erased. The leaf was part of the archive of the Bishop of Hólar before being handed over to the Icelandic National Archives. In 1902 it was deposited in the Icelandic National Library.

The vellum strip presents a bilingual text with some parts in Latin and others in the vernacular (incantations). The Latin scriptures are taken from Erasmus of Rotterdam’s translation of the New Testament (1516), and precisely from John (1:1-4), and Matthew (8:1-13 and 9:1-8), which Erasmus followed to the letter except for the opening passage from the Book of John, where he translated: “In principio erat sermo”. In this case, the text follows the Vulgate and writes: “In principio erat verbum”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Russell 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Meyer, Smith 1999, 53-64.

<sup>6</sup> *Novum instrumentum omne*. 1516, 188. Actually, the translation *sermo* dates back to Tertullian, *advers. Prax.* 5: “Item in usu est nostrorum, per simplicitatem interpretationis sermonem dicere in primordio apud Deum fuisse, quum magis rationem competat antiquiorem haberi, quia non sermonalis a principio, sed rationalis Deus etiam ante principium.”: Evans

The Colic leaf is anonymous, and its author's identity will probably remain unknown. However, it was attributed to Jón Guðmundsson the Learned (1574-1658), on the base of palaeographic evidences, since its handwriting strongly resembles that of manuscript Reykjavík, Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn, Lbs 1235 8° (*Pistlar og collectur*), which was proved to have been written by Jón the Learned.<sup>7</sup> In 1631, Jón was brought to justice for having written texts containing runes against yellow fever, rash, loss of appetite, cough, itching, and headache. Despite protesting that he did not mean “to harm any man or beast”, the judges “reasoned that it was an ‘absolute blasphemy against God’s holy name’ that was ‘in no way tolerable’”.<sup>8</sup> In the ‘Kýraugastaðir Agreement’ of 1592, written by Bishop Oddur Einarsson (1559-1630), it was stated that those who practiced sorcery, exorcisms and Colic leaves, as well as other devilry through which they pretended to cure the ailments and sickness of men, should be punished by their priests.<sup>9</sup> As consequence, Jón was outlawed for his writings.<sup>10</sup>

1951, 63. The theological dispute stemming from the word choice involved a different view of the divinity.

<sup>7</sup> Gunnar Marel Hinriksson 2018, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. also Magnús Már Lárusson 1951-52, 82.

<sup>10</sup> Although the sentence proved that Jón certainly wrote similar texts, one must not forget that there were many others who regularly wrote exorcisms. For example, Gísli Snæbjarnarson (ca. 1570) was charged with unsuccessfully attempting to cure the daughter of Bergþór from Kúludalsá. His methods consisted of “papers, letters, alphabets, figures and characters” (Gunnar Marel Hinriksson 2018, 4). He escaped the stake with a warning and avoided being outlawed. The sentence was based on the ‘Witchcraft Regulation’ imposed in 1617 by Christian IV, king of Denmark. This regulation was translated by the priest Guðmundur Einarsson (ca. 1568-1647) in his 1627 essay, which he wrote against Jón the Learned, where he stated that: “dagleg reynsla kennir það, að nokkrar heimug legar konstir, sem eru signingar, særingar, rúnir [og] galdrastafir [...] tíðkast mjög og haldast fyrir þann hlut, sem er vel líðanlegur og ekki forboðinn sé. Af þeirri orsök að þessir menn sem fremja þvílíkar konstir, aktast fyrir soddan menn, sem gagn gjöri og heilbrigði gefi, bæði mönnum og peningum manna, þar með og af því að í þvílíkri kunnáttu tíðkast oft og tíðum nokkur tiltekin Guðs orð. Svo því er í vind slegið með öllu, að þvílík list sé af Almáttugum Guði harðlega fyrirboðin, svo sem sú er mannskepnuna leiðir frá Guði og þeirri náttúrulegri hjálp og lækni dómi sem hann tilsett hefur, til djöfulsins heimug legra og ónáttúrulegra ráða og miðils.” (Daily experience teaches, that a few secret crafts, such as making the sign of the cross, exorcising, runes and magic symbols are very common and are thought to be acceptable and not forbidden. For the reason that the men who do these deeds are taken for the kind of men who do good and give health, both to men and beasts, for in doing so they often use particular words of God. Regardless of that, this art is strongly forbidden by God almighty, as it leads the human being from God and the natural

In his pioneering study, Magnús Már Lárusson conjectures that the author of the text of the Colic leaf might have been a scholar who collaborated on the translation of Erasmus's New Testament into Icelandic.<sup>11</sup> In his interpretation, the use of Gospel episodes in medical spells goes back to the twelfth century, in particular to John of Salisbury, who had claimed the efficacy of *capitula Evangelii, vel gestata, vel audita, vel dicta*, listing the most effective parts in Book I, chs.1-14.<sup>12</sup> He also sees the same use in a number of Danish and Norwegian magic formulas and observes that this practice came from Denmark and entered Iceland through Norway.<sup>13</sup> He highlights the influence of Luther's Bible on the 1540 New Testament: for example, the usual word for 'lame', *lami*, is not used and the term for 'lame' is *icktsiukur* 'gouty', due to the influence of Luther's text, which used *gichtbriichiger*. Such words had entered Icelandic from Norway around 1500. On the other hand, he attributes the alliterating and poetic parts of the translation to the national Icelandic cultural heritage and the Old Norse tradition.

### 3. *The historiolae*

Like other magic incantations, the Colic leaf typically starts by introducing a well-known strategy consisting of the sympathetic narrative section traditionally used in many Greek, Roman, and Germanic medical and magic texts: so-called *historiola*.

*Historiolae* were anecdotes from pagan or Christian legends by which events from the epic past were associated with a current situation.<sup>14</sup> The strategy of reporting a mythological story in which a similar health problem had been solved was based on the idea of magic similarity. These narrative sections show a marked preference for the marvellous: as far as Christian stories are concerned, miracle narratives usually take pride of place in the charms, where extraordinary events were emphasized to open perspectives toward a different world, where it is possible to bring about changes: in particular, in order to heal someone. The parallel may be simply based on a formula, a

help and medicine that he has prescribed, to the devil's secret and unnatural means and media: *ibid.*, 4) (cf. *Diplomatarium Islandicum*. Fimmtánda bindi. 1947-50).

<sup>11</sup> Magnús Már Lárusson 1951-52, 81-90.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from *ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90; Bang 1901-2, 472, no. 1071; Ohrt 1917-21, I, 499 and II, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Roper 2005, 35-37. See also the essay by Letizia Vezzosi in this volume.

mythological *kenning* or an image through which a famous myth is recalled. The name of a god (a supernatural being, famous for fighting an evildoer, a giant, or a dangerous animal, like the Miðgarðr's serpent, or the wolf Fenrir) may also be evoked. Rhetorical tropes formally concentrated, like comparisons, similes, and metaphors, belong to this analogic strategy as well. In Scandinavia, a famous example is the Swedish Kvinneby runic amulet from the thirteenth century with the image of Þórr's fishing expedition, found in South Kvinneby (Sweden). In this case, a supernatural helper fights against a monster symbolizing the destruction of an evil agent, in the specific case, the illness.

Another example is provided by the Sigtuna amulet C10, where there occurs the kenning Þursa *dróttin* 'the prince of the Þursis' which might be interpreted as a concentrated *historiola*. Since Þursa *dróttin* is a famous mythological *kenning* ('Þursar are a race of giants'), the illness is metaphorically referred to by a *kenning* indicating the prince of evildoers, recalling of the myth (told in the Eddic lay *Þrymskviða*) of the giant Þrymr who was defeated by Þórr.<sup>15</sup>

Normally, amulets lack sufficient space for a whole narrative. But the Colic leaf, being larger in size when compared with most amulets and texts written on parchment in the Latin alphabet, has more space available and hosts quite long quotations. These tell two episodes: the one where Christ – the hero of Christian religion – heals a leper, and the other where a centurion asks Christ to heal one of his servants by just saying one word (the Gospel words are reported in direct speech). The *historiolae* from the two Gospels are in Latin, the most authoritative language at that time. Its use points out that we do not deal with magic at a folk level, but with the book-learned, demonic magic of an educated man, as the charm language and length show. The text originated in a bilingual social context, the clergy: a particularly common circumstance in Iceland, where practitioners of charming were mostly priests. From trial deeds during the persecution against sorcery, out of the 125 accused, only 9 were women, in sharp contrast with what happened in the rest of Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Latin was the prestigious language of religious culture, ceremonies, and rituals, even though very few could understand it. The Colic leaf presents more than one switching from Latin to Icelandic and vice-versa, with the spe-

<sup>15</sup> Neckel 1983, 78-82.

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that, in her article *Catholic Saints in Lutheran Legends*, Margaret Cormack uses the expression 'clerical sorcerer' for a famous Icelandic priest, Eiríkur í Vogsum (1638-1713), who was said to have stuck a fragment of the holy cross among the timber of the church: Cormack 2008, 58.

cial metaphorical goal to heighten the power of its words. In such a bilingual context (hinting at a powerful class of clergymen able to write both in Latin and the vernacular), Latin was meant to convey the holy words of the living God, regarded as still effective. Each time they were uttered, their power was re-activated:

[...] *Qum descendisset autem de monte, Sequutæ sunt eum turbæ multe Et ecce leprosus accedens adoravit eum dicens. Domine Si velis potes me mundare. Protensanque manu tetigit illum Iesus dicens. Volo mundus esto Ac protinus mundata fuit illius lepra / Et dicit illi Iesus Vide ne cui dixeris. Sed abi ostende te ipsum sacerdoti / Et offer munus quod iussit offerre moyses in testimonium ipsis / Porre cum Ingressus fuisset ihesus Capernaum, adiit eam Centurio obsecrans eum Et dicens: Domine famulus meus decumbit domi paralyticus ac grauiter discrutiat / Et dicit illi ihesus Ego cum venero medebor illi Et respondens Centurio dixit Domine non Sum idoneus vt tectum meum Subeas imo tantum dic verbum, Et sanabitur famulus meus / nam Et ego sum homo alterius potestati subditus Et habeo Sub me milites.[...]*<sup>17</sup>

In the case of amulets and Colic leaves, the reactivation also took place by wearing them on the body. The physical contact between the sick body and God's *Verbum* was regarded as being very effective since the healing was supposed to take place on two levels: by osmosis, referring to the ancient topos of healing with the hands (touch), and by healing through the medium of words (hearing).

#### 4. Code-switching

On a sociolinguistic level, the abovementioned fluctuation of code selection may be seen as a choice reflecting the diglossic situation in the Icelandic community. We can define it as multifunctional since it serves simultaneously both as a macro-level social function and a micro-level interpersonal one.<sup>18</sup>

It emphasizes the social distance between the performer and the client, having a clearly metaphorical function as well, since a certain code is consid-

<sup>17</sup> Magnús Már Lárusson 1951-52, 86. From now on the text is quoted from Magnús Már Lárusson's edition.

<sup>18</sup> Gumperz 1982, 75-81; Romaine 1995, 161-165.

ered to be associated with abstract notions such as power or prestige in order to win the patient over to the practitioner's close relationship with the supernatural agent (Christ).

In our text we can identify a functional distribution of the codes: the conjuration against the evil agent is in the vernacular, whereas the pre-established sets of powerful words, i.e., the prayers and the *historiolae*, are in Latin, according to a pattern found in other charms with medical purposes. It combines the authority of Latin as the language of the Church with the wider appeal of the vernacular and its larger intelligibility. There is not only a change of language but also a change of register and connotation: from a high and solemn tone to a lower and more popular one. Latin passages predominate and, despite the shortness of the sentences, feature a higher number of subordinate clauses, direct speech, and present participles, while the passages in Icelandic are simpler and based on parataxis (but with a few present participles as well). The text starts with a Gospel *historiola* in Latin, to switch thereafter to Icelandic, and vice-versa, eventually moving back again in the opposite direction. Sometimes these switches only affect one or two words, as in the following case:

Jaurd kref eg orda enn vpp himins Sol Sanctam trijnitatem Siaalfuan Gud er eg  
bidiandi at hann [...] <sup>19</sup>

(I beseech the earth the words and up the Sun / of the Heaven and the *Sanctam trijnitatem* itself / God I pray that he [...])

The two episodes from the Gospel – including their dialogues – appear among antiphonal replies by liturgical groups in chant collections belonging to the Mass Office Antiphon to be sung on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany. Over the centuries, the recounting of miracles was adapted to various purposes and found a place in different literary genres: the kerygmatic life of Jesus Christ was retold in homilies, narrative hymns and chants, to be used also in exorcistic texts like those of the Colic leaves, which stem in part from such liturgical texts.<sup>20</sup>

After the two Biblical *historiolae*, our text features an invocation in the vernacular. Its first part begins with an appeal to Christ. This initial prayer is full of divine epithets and definitions, typical of Christian Latin hymns as well

<sup>19</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

<sup>20</sup> See Nock 1929, 379-395.



as of late Christian skaldic poetry where these names and compounds had found a place:<sup>21</sup>

Pu ed *sanna* lios Guddomzins *ihesus* þu ert vor lækning Sem græder vor meijn So sem þu lijfgader z heijlann giorder þennann lima fallz siuka edur kueijsu Siuka So lækna þu nu fyrir þinn kragt z ord þessa þijna þionustu kuinnu / S + n.<sup>22</sup>

(You are the true light of Divinity, Oh Jesus, you who are our remedy which heals me. As you give life and heal this body from illness and the colic, so, please, heal now this female servant of yours by thy might. S+n.)

The tone of a supplication and the many praising epithets characterize this passage and introduce the plea to heal *þijna þionustu* ‘your servant’ (that is the sick woman). The petitioner is portrayed as humble and submissive before the immense power of God.

The repetitions and the alliterating words, combined with the imperative verbal form, yield the text the needed emphasis and are meant to reinforce the plea and make it even more effective. Epithets like the jubilant *Jhesus sol naadarinnar* ‘Jesus, sun of grace’ occurring later in the prayer (“*jhesus christus Sól naadarinnar miskunsemdar z fridar þu ert lios sannleijkans.*” ‘Jesus, sun of grace and mercy and peace, you are the light of truth’) appeal to the supernatural agent for intercession. These kinds of pleas – addressed to heathen gods – also occur in pagan amulets, for example, in the Blæsinge lead amulet.<sup>23</sup>

Such laudatory epithets are commonplace in Christian hymns, the Latin and vernacular versions of which were very popular in Medieval Iceland. It has been demonstrated that hymn collections influenced early Icelandic Christian poetry especially as far as the laudatory lexicon is concerned.<sup>24</sup> We might easily assume that such collections (in both Latin and Icelandic) would have been available to the author of the Colic leaf, who was presumably a clergyman, and were among his sources. Another clue which reinforces my assumption is the presence of exactly the same *historiolae* in the liturgical hymns to be sung at mass on the third Sunday after the Epiphany.

<sup>21</sup> See Clunies Ross 2008 and Lombardi 2004, 68-70.

<sup>22</sup> Magnús Már Lárusson 1951-52, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Stoklund 1987, 189-211.

<sup>24</sup> Lombardi 2004, 68-70.



Several manuscripts containing liturgical texts as well as their melodies were in circulation in Iceland and were drawn upon by different kind of literature, especially during the period of transition from the Catholic to the Lutheran confession. One of the best known is København, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, NKS 138 4<sup>o</sup>, preserving a gradual from the late sixteenth century.<sup>25</sup> It contains chants for both Mass and Office which combined gradual and antiphonal forms. Liturgical songs also featured biblical *historiolae* narrating the miracles of Christ: these parts were written in straightforward narrative, interspersed with dialogues taken from the Gospels, and the episodes verbally resemble those in the Colic leaf. Both the large diffusion of such catechetical and liturgical works and the number of their translations and adaptations in Scandinavia, are well known.<sup>26</sup> Some of these hymns tell about the life and miracles of Christ, while others include invocations featuring the names of God in both Latin and Hebrew, which we also find in our text.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the formal features of hymnody like the text layout (vertically arranged and often written following a narrow and elongated pattern), as well as their brief and syntetic texts, might have been a source of inspiration for the Colic leaves authors in general.

<sup>25</sup> Solhaug 2003: “This manuscript probably served as a temporary liturgical agenda and handbook for services in the years before the first authorized liturgical books in Iceland: the Hymnbook 1589 and the Guðbrandur Þorlákssons Gradual 1594, both of which were printed. The author of Ny Kgl. Saml. 138 4<sup>o</sup> was Gísli Jónsson, the third Lutheran bishop of Skálholt. Gísli Jónsson might have initiated this manuscript shortly after he and his fellow bishop at Hólar received an edict from King Fredrik II in 1585 April 29th. [...] The first part of the manuscript includes traditional chants both for Mass and Office.” <<http://wayback-01.kb.dk/wayback/20101108104538/http://www2.kb.dk/elib/mss/graduale/index-en.htm>> (last accessed July 12, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> A famous antiphoner which circulated all over Europe, reaching also Scandinavia, is preserved in a late tenth-century manuscript from the Abbey of St Gall, St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek 390, known as the Winter volume of the so-called Hartker Antiphoner and containing chants from Advent until Easter. Together with St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek 391 (Summer volume), this manuscript forms a complete antiphoner written and illuminated by Hartker in his cell where he lived as a recluse until his death in 1011. Originally composed as a single book, it was divided into two volumes by the mid-thirteenth century. See Gjerløw 1979, 97-115, and <<http://cantusindex.org/analecta-hymnica>> and <<https://cantus.uwaterloo.ca/source/123718>> (last accessed November 30, 2020). The St Gall antiphoner features the same Gospel episodes as the *historiolae* of the Colic leaf.

### 5. *The incantation*

Following the narratives from the Gospels, the prayers and the laudatory epithets, where code-switching is limited to short sentences, names, and compound words, the most astonishing switching takes place: the text turns into a charm in Icelandic, uttering a relentless exorcism in a completely different mood:

ieg særi þig kueijsa burt at flyia z allz haattad meijn illsku verki edur stijupa (?)  
 edur Saara suidi / ieg særi þig ikt z kueisa burt at flyia ieg mana þig eg deyfi  
 þig eg drep þic : q : sprijngi hin blaa. spraki en rauda: dofni aang . . seigi held  
 . . a . d . . . kueijsu: h . . f . . drafni So sem drottinn vor mælti hann f . d . . sta  
 . . . verdi huert ord z Atvik greijne.<sup>28</sup>

(I exorcise thee ‘fly away and in all arrange my hurting anger, or aches or burning wounds, I exorcise thee, gout and colic, fly away I dare thee and I subdue thee, I kill thee, colic: Let the blue explode: let the red crackle: thrive the vapour, win... a... d... the colic: h... f... untie thyself as our lord said f... d... sta... praise every word and clarify the incident.)

The passage suggests a theurgic ceremony, employing the verbal sequence *ieg særi þig* ‘I exorcise you’, which is typical of runic spells and exorcisms, where a supernatural creature is somehow compelled to intervene.

On rune sticks or other magic amulets, the name of a pagan intercessor or a compound word referring to such being usually follows this bidding sequence, however this part of the Colic leaf, does not mention any intercessor. Thus, according to Grendon’s list of the formal charm features, one of the traditional components of charms is missing (or was modified at some point).<sup>29</sup> Probably this is due to the adaptation of a former charm from a pagan context to a Christian one, which requested that the pagan agent be cancelled.

The well-known banishing formula *burt at flya* ‘fly away!’ follows the traditional pattern occurring in a number of Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish runic amulets. For instance, we find the formula in the already quoted Sigtuna runic amulet C10 for a fever, where the words *braut riða!*, ‘ride away, fever!’ are addressed to a giant, who is mentioned in the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða*:

<sup>28</sup> Magnús Már Lárusson 1951-52, 88.

<sup>29</sup> Grendon 1909, 22 and 150-172.

“þur sarriþu þursa trutin fliu þu nu funtin is[tu]”<sup>30</sup> (‘Þurs of wound-fever, lord of þursar, flee now; you have been found’).

In the Colic leaf, the “flee formula” is introduced by the sequence *ieg særi þig* ‘I exorcise thee’, which occurs in the first line of the passage quoted above, and is varied, in the second line, as *ieg mana þig eg deyfi þig eg drep þig* ‘I dare thee, I subdue thee and I kill thee’, which has a parallel, for example, in the rune stick N B241 from Bergen, (carved between 1375 and 1400), where Odin is evoked and exorcised to reveal the name of a thief.<sup>31</sup> These kinds of invocation formulas were very common in ancient times, and were used especially against thieves. The Bergen rune stick N-B241 reads:

Ek særi þik, Óðinn, með heiðindómi, mestr fjánda;  
 játa því; seg mér nafn þess manns er stal;  
 fyr kristni; seg mér nú þína ódád.  
 Eitt niðik, annat (?) niðik: seg mér, Óðinn!  
 Nú ér særð ok árafár (?) með öllu heiðindómi.  
 Þú nú öðlisk mér nafn þess er stal. A(men).<sup>32</sup>

(I exhort you, Odin, with heathendom, greatest of fiends;  
 assent to this: tell me the name of the man who stole;  
 for Christendom; tell me now your misdeed.  
 One I revile, the second I revile; tell me, Odin!  
 Now is conjured up and lots of devilish messengers [?] with all heathendom.  
 Now you shall get for me the name of he who stole. A[men].)<sup>33</sup>

Unlike the two runic examples quoted above, in the Icelandic Colic leaf charm the mediator is missing. What has been preserved of the old charm structure is the pattern of command, the aggressive and urging tone emphasized by the repeated sequences of personal pronouns: *ieg* ‘I’, referring to the healer/enchanter, in the nominative, and *þig* ‘thee’, referring to the evil

<sup>30</sup> MacLeod, Mees 2006, 118.

<sup>31</sup> Spurkland 2005, 68, see also the *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* at: <<https://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm/>> (last accessed December 12, 2020). This is the case of the twelfth- thirteenth- and fourteenth centuries amulets found during the 1950s archaeological excavations of the former medieval port of Bergen in Norway (*Bryggen*, the ancient portal district was destroyed by a terrible fire in 1955), when a number of rune sticks bearing short inscriptions, many of them interpreted as charms or spells, was brought to light.

<sup>32</sup> MacLeod, Mees 2006, 31.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

agent (the illness) in the accusative, to witness the superiority of the healer/enchanter.

When we compare the Colic leaf with the runic text, a number of common features are evident. The weak verb *særa*, used in both texts, which generally means ‘to exorcise’, emphasizes the magician’s violent pressure upon Odin in a ‘crescendo’ that reaches its climax with the word *níðik* of the Bergen rune stick. On the other hand, the name of the pagan god is absent in the Icelandic incantation and there is a difference between the prayer petitionary nature of the Latin parts of the Colic leaf and the commando tone of the passage of the rune stick, where the climax is reached with the words *ek drep þic* addressed directly to the sickness, without resorting to any mediator and omitting the typical last words of advice of the amulets: ‘keep it with you’.

The listing of the ways to destroy the malevolent spirit (that is the disease) and the performer boasting about his power over such enemy expressed by a meaningful use of pronouns are also typical charm components, again according to Grendon.<sup>34</sup>

Noteworthy is the presence of the colours *blaa* ‘blue’ and *rauda* ‘red’, which are quite usual in medical treatises, especially in those belonging to the *Signa mortis* tradition, and used to connote the symptoms when describing the evolution of an abscess or a cyst towards the gangrene that would appear before the death. Their occurrence makes this passage of the Colic leaf open to different interpretations, either metaphorical or realistic. Metaphorically speaking, the red may refer to fire (a burning infection) as also the verb seems to convey, or to arterial blood, while the blue might refer to bruises or venous blood.<sup>35</sup>

As pointed out before,<sup>36</sup> in Northern Europe the clergy had become the depositary of both pagan and Christian knowledge.<sup>37</sup> These authors, however, did not disdain alliterations, assonances, repetitions, and variations that were

<sup>34</sup> Grendon 1909, 22, 150-173.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. a medical text about the *Signa mortis* contained in ms. London, British Library, Sloane 405, f. 123v: “And yef two postemes wexen abowt þe navel and þe on be whit and þe tother bloo and abowte red as blode þat same day he shall dye” (‘And if two abscesses have formed around the navel, one white and the other bluish and around red like blood, on the same day he will die.’): Colafrancesco 2019, 140.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Clunies Ross 2008.

<sup>37</sup> A Norwegian archbishop in the middle of the fourteenth century was obliged to issue proclamations against those who engaged in runes, medications, black magic and superstition, and twenty-five Icelandic men lost their lives because of accusations of practicing witchcraft. Cf. Kolsrud 1913, 264-265.

typical of Old Norse poetry and which were artfully employed, as in the Colic leaf, in order to recreate a sort of epic solemnity and evoke the heroic past.

Following the section of the text written in the vernacular, the Colic leaf continues with a passage characterized by a mixture of Hebrew, Greek and Latin expressions: *eleyson ymas* ‘Have mercy!’ and *Eli heli* ‘My god! My god!’, which is followed by the well-known formula *Sator Arepo Opera Rotas* (where one word of the original formula *sator* is misspelled as *sator*):

eleyson ymas. / Sator (!) Arepo tenit opera rotas per Crucidis hoc Signum  
procul fugiat omnem maalignum z per idem Signum saluetur omne benignum  
Eli heli heleij helioam lux tetra Grammaton. Sodaael.adonajj Emanuel jhesus  
Ihesus nazareus rex judeorum filij dei [...] Miserere me Salua me et Sana me.<sup>38</sup>

The words *Adonai* ‘Lord’, *Emmanuel* ‘God with us’, *Nazareus* are listed in several exorcisms and charms written on Scandinavian amulets and runic sticks such as those found in Bergen and the Borglund Church in Norway as well as in Greenland (for example the amulet of Kilaarsarfik)<sup>39</sup> and according to MacLeod, they were drawn from the *Alma chorus*, the office hymn for the compline of Whitsunday in the Sarum rite. In the hymn, the words occur in this order: *Messias Soter, Emanuel, Sabaoth, Adonai*.<sup>40</sup>

The formula, *Sator Arepo opera rotas* was known as the ‘Devil’s Latin’ or ‘Devil’s square’.<sup>41</sup> We are not going to discuss it here, but it suffices to observe that it remained popular in Scandinavia until the nineteenth century as a protection against theft and illnesses. The magical effect of the formula lies in the possibility of forming a square of 25 letters if read in the same way horizontally and vertically, from left to right and vice-versa.<sup>42</sup> Remarkable is the emphasis on

<sup>38</sup> Magnús Már Lárusson 1951-52, 87.

<sup>39</sup> MacLeod, Mees 2006, 196.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 191. This hymn was used in Norwegian and in Icelandic masses since the twelfth century and became popular in Norwegian and Icelandic literature.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* The earliest occurrences of the formula are found in the ruins of Pompei, suggesting that it was originally pre-Christian: some researchers maintain that it might have originated as a symbol of the wheel (*rotas*) or might have been associated to fertility rites. The use of the word-square in many sorts of magic (frequently appearing alongside other palindromes and magic formulas) proves that any linguistic sense was lost quite early, and that the words interest lies more in their apotropaic effect or re-interpretation. The formula also appears in a fifteenth-century Icelandic charm against heavy menstrual bleeding which had to be written on a stick and tied to a thigh of the sufferer (Larsen 1931, 109-110, note 28) and also in Ice-

number five (all the words are composed of five letters) traditionally referring to Christ's suffering on the cross and his five wounds. Devotion to the five wounds of Christ, reaching an artistic and literary peak in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, found its way into healing charms as well as charms asking for protection from sorcery and weapons as well as in those for tracing missing people.<sup>43</sup>

It is difficult to establish whether the corrupted word *sator* is a deliberate misspelling or a mistake. The process of deconstructing a meaningful word into a lexically unexpected word was frequent in this kind of texts and this phenomenon has been given the name of "magicalization of lexemes".<sup>44</sup> In this case, we might have to do with a real mistake, but *sator* might also have been introduced on purpose to disrupt the palindromic effect. Words had hence taken on a magical meaning independently from the magic square-principle that originally regulated the sequence.

## 6. Conclusions

This is only a partial presentation of the Icelandic Colic leaf, the relevance of which is suggested by what has been said above. Its text features a large number of special characteristics and is particularly important, for example, for the amount of external references, all extremely interesting, which was impossible to cover here.

A mixture of sources of different genres and provenance flowed into this hybrid magic-medical-religious text to be worn by the patient, and therefore it is classifiable as an amulet. This Colic leaf is a mix of Christian (Catholic and Protestant) prayers, Jewish Gnostic material, and popular formulas reminiscent of Germanic poetry, including alliterating words, etc. As with other medieval magic incantations, the leaf text contains echoes of the psalms, in both Latin and the vernacular, and mentions characters from the Judeo-Christian tradition (Jesus, Jakob, Isaac, and Abraham), names ending in *-el*, clearly modelled on Hebrew-Jewish figures, e.g. *Emmanuel* or *Sodael* (a name which betrays combinatorial inventiveness), or the variety of angels' names (e.g. *Gabriel*).<sup>45</sup> It

land, on a much later runic stick from Bergþórshvoll, dated to the seventeenth or eighteenth century, along with an incomplete Latin alphabet written in runic characters: *abcdefghijklmnopqrstu / sator arepo tenet opera rotas*: see Dyvik 1988, 1-9.

<sup>43</sup> See Hofmann 1964, 39-53.

<sup>44</sup> See Miller 1986, 496.

<sup>45</sup> Peterson 1926, 397-398.

contains the trinitarian formula of benediction peculiar to the Catholic Church, as well as elements belonging to Judeo-Gnostic formulas (e.g. *Jehova*, *Adonai*, *Emanuel*, *Sabaoth*, the *Tetragrammaton*), which should have been drawn from the books of magic imported from the Continent.

Despite its use of formulas typical of pagan amulets and although it presents the well-known linguistic structure of Scandinavian pagan charms, the leaf does not mention any heathen god. This choice might be attributed to its author, either a monk or a priest who refused to quote the names of pagan gods. We must also bear in mind that the tone of command was not considered appropriate for these late healing charms. In fact, as far as the actual methods of working magic are concerned, there should have been a shift of emphasis in the formulas by which the magician bid for the intercession of some supernatural being, possibly modelled on the formulas of Christian prayers.

We have a limited number of written sources dating from the transitional era when the Colic leaf was written. From what has come down to us, it is possible to speculate that the heathen tradition had been kept alive for a long time and eventually underwent a progressive syncretism with the Christian tradition. The frequent code-switching of the text under examination provides an effective guide to understanding the net of relationships existing within the Icelandic society and their changes across the time, between the end of the Middle Ages and the Reformation period. The text of the Colic leaf casts some light on how different classes interacted, influencing each other, and on the historical development which social groups (for example, the clergy) underwent, as well as on the strategies enacted to bring about these changes.

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