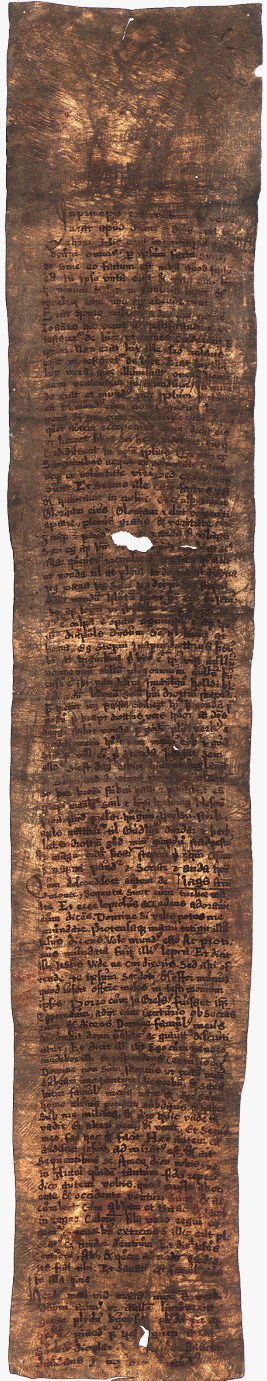




“I exorcise thee gout  
and colic away to  
flee, I dare thee,  
I subdue thee,  
I kill thee, colic.”

# The Colic Leaf

Lbs fragm. 14



In the manuscripts collection at the National and University Library of Iceland, you may find a 400 year old vellum, dark and obscure with age, with the shelfmark Lbs fragm. 14. The vellum is 58.4 × 10.8 cm and dates back to circa 1600. Writing is on both sides of the vellum, covering the leaf. There is a 9 cm gap at the top before the text begins. There are two holes in the vellum and the letters are somewhat obscure, and in some places illegible. The leaf was part of the archive of the Bishop of Hólar and was handed over to the National Archives. In 1902 it was deposited to the National Library to preserve.

“A distinction was made between white magic, exorcisms to protect the body and soul, and black magic which was intended to harm.”

The text, in Latin and Icelandic, is an exorcism against colic and gout. Exorcisms have existed in all religions since prehistoric times when access to health care was scarce to say the least. A distinction was made between white magic, exorcisms to protect the body and soul, and black magic which was intended to harm. The Christian rite of crossing oneself is a simple form of white magic; it repels evil and is customary in most exorcisms such as the one on display. Still, the effectiveness of the exorcism comes through the incantation, with the obvious choice being the Holy Scripture as it was believed to behold the greatest power. This vellum contains scripture in Latin with incantation in Icelandic in between. The Latin scriptures, taken from Erasmus of Rotterdam's 1516 translation of the *New Testament* are from the Book of John 1:1-4, and the Book of Matthew 8:1-13 and 9:1-8. The texts are nearly identical, except for

the opening passage from the Book of John: „In the beginning was the word“, where Erasmus translates it to: *In principio erat sermo* but in the vellum and in the traditional Latin translation of the Bible, *Vulgata*, it is: *In principio erat verbum*.

“The creator of the Colic Leaf is unknown and it is unlikely that their identity will ever be discovered.”

The creator of the Colic Leaf is unknown and it is unlikely that their identity will ever be discovered. However, there is a theory that it was written by Jón Guðmundsson the learned (1574–1658), but that has not been confirmed. Jón is the right age to have written the Leaf, and there is paleographic evidence to support the theory as the handwriting on the Leaf bears a strong resemblance to the manuscript *Lbs 1235 8vo, Pistlar og Collectur*, which is attributed to Jón.

The church and secular authorities began to frown upon witchcraft after the Reformation and began to enforce laws against it. In 1631, Jón the learned was brought to justice for having written various texts, which contained „runes against yellow fever, rash, loss of appetite, cough, itching and headache“. Jón protested that it was not meant to harm any man or beast, but the judges reasoned that it was an „absolute blasphemy against God’s holy name“ and „in no way tolerable“. Jón was outlawed for his writings.

Although the sentence proves that Jón certainly wrote texts of this nature, one must not disregard the fact that there were others who were also writing exorcisms. Gísli Snæbjarnarson (born ca. 1570) was in 1630 charged with unsuccessfully attempting to

cure the daughter of Bergþór from Kúludalsá “in good faith.” His methods were „such papers, letters, alphabets, figures and characters“. He escaped with a warning and avoided being outlawed.

Both of these sentences were based on the Witchcraft Regulation of 1617 set by Christian IV, King of Denmark. In his 1627 essay *Hugrás*, written against Jón the learned, Rev. Guðmundur Einarsson (ca. 1568–1647) translated the regulation. It states that:

*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 man and beast, 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 help and medicine that he has prescribed, to the devil's secret and unnatural means and media.*

“The church and secular authorities began to frown upon witchcraft after the Reformation and began to enforce laws against it.”

Rev. Guðmundur demanded Jón the learned to be burned at the stake for his witchcraft. Even though the secular authorities began to clamp down on witchcraft after 1617, the church had earlier begun to give notice to such affairs. Bishop Oddur Einarsson (1559–1630) made the Accord of Kýraugastaðir in 1592. It states that “those who practice sorcery,

exorcisms and colic leaves, and other devilry, with which they pretend to cure the ailments and sickness of men, be punished by their priest [...] because we believe severe blasphemy lies therein.”

“The Colic Leaf is a unique testament to people’s attempts to cure diseases with methods the authorities sought to eradicate.”

The Colic Leaf is a unique testament to people’s attempts to cure diseases with methods the authorities sought to eradicate. Almost all vellums of this nature were destroyed in the witchhunts of the 17th century. Evidence of their existence, and the fate of their authors, is mainly to be found in the court documents of cases brought against them.

**References:**

Lbs fragm. 14

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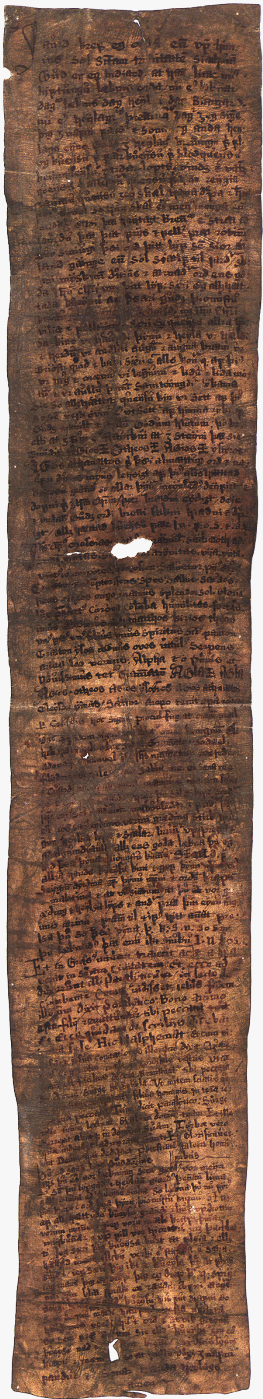
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