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## LAPIDARIES AND *LYFSTEINAR*

### *Health, Enhancement and Human-Lithic Relations in Medieval Iceland*<sup>1</sup>

CONCEPTS OF THE BODY and human health in Old Norse-Icelandic literature have received considerable scholarly interest in recent years. This owes in no small part to the burgeoning field of disability studies<sup>2</sup> and its application to medieval material. The tendency of earlier enquiries to pathologise bodily and mental differences in terms of modern disorders<sup>3</sup> is increasingly being replaced by a more nuanced approach towards the social construction and presentation of disability and its intersection with other discourses of power, gender and social in/exclusion.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, there has been increased interest in medieval theories of medicine,

- 1 I would like to thank my two anonymous reviewers for their comments, which have informed my thinking within and beyond this article. My thanks also to Judy Quinn for her feedback on an earlier draft and to Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir for her generous help with the Icelandic text of my abstract.
- 2 Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field that approaches disability through its intersection with culture and society. It offers an alternative approach that does not rely exclusively on the biomedical framing of disability as a deficit.
- 3 See, e.g., Jesse Byock, “The Skull and Bones in Egils saga: A Viking, A Grave, and Pager’s Disease,” *Viator* 24 (1993): 23–50; Peter Stride, “Egill Skallagrímsson: The First Case of Van Buchem Disease?,” *J R Coll Physicians Edinb* 41 (2011): 169–73; Jon Geir Høyesteren, “Manifestations of Psychiatric Illness in Texts from the Medieval and Viking Era,” *Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy* 2 (2015): 57–60; Diana Whaley and David Elliot, “A Medieval Casebook: Hand Cures Documented in the Icelandic Sagas of Bishops,” *Journal of Hand Surgery* 19B.5 (1994): 667–71.
- 4 See, e.g., all articles in the special edition edited by Christopher Crocker, “Disability in the Medieval Nordic World,” *Mirator* 20.2 (2021), as well as Crocker’s bibliography of disability in medieval saga writing (<https://cwecrocker.com/bibliography-of-disability-studies-and-the-medieval-icelandic-sagas/>). For a detailed overview of disability studies in the context of Norse scholarship, see Ármann Jakobsson et al., “Disability before Disability: Mapping the Uncharted in the Medieval Sagas,” *Scandinavian Studies* 92.4 (2020): 440–60.

particularly humoral theory,<sup>5</sup> and the degree to which such theories intersected with or influenced medieval Icelandic conceptions of body, emotion and wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> A thread common to these growing areas of research is the relationship between humans and the social and material world: how physical and cognitive health, though rooted in the body, is not necessarily conceptually bounded by this body. This aligns with recent research into concepts of body and personhood in the medieval North by Kirsi Kanerva and Miriam Mayburd, who argue that the human body was understood to be porous and “open” to the physical environment.<sup>7</sup>

- 5 Humoral theory was the dominant model of medieval physiology, deriving from the Greek physicians Hippocrates (c. 460–370 BCE) and Galen (129–c. 200CE). This theory envisages not only a mind–body continuum (in which both physical and mental health were contingent on maintaining a balance of the four humours) but also a body–world continuum: each of the four humours comprising humans’ physical and cognitive natures (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile) were composed of the same properties as the four elements of which the world was made (Miranda Anderson, “Distributed Cognition in Medieval and Renaissance Studies,” *Distributed Cognition in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, ed. by Miranda Anderson and Michael Wheeler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 24). Humours were thought to be influenced by a wide range of external stimuli, from planets to daydreams (Julie Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects: Bodies, Medicine and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 26). An imbalance between the four humours was considered the cause of ill physical and psychological health and could be managed by regulating intake of foods and medicines and the excretion of bodily substances (Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, “Emotions in *Njáls saga* and *Egils saga*: Approaches and Literary Analysis” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2020): 63).
- 6 Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, “Humoral Theory in the Medieval North: An Old Norse Translation of *Epistula Vindiciani* in Hauksbók,” *Gripla* 29 (2018): 35–66; Yoav Tirosh, “Milk, Masculinity, and Humor-Less Vikings – Gender in the Old Norse Polysystem,” *Limes* 13 (2020): 136–50; Colin Mackenzie, “Vernacular Psychologies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Old English” (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2014): 128–43; Kirsi Kanerva, “Porous Bodies, Porous Minds. Emotions and the Supernatural in the *Íslendingasögur* (ca. 1200–1400)” (PhD diss., University of Turku, 2015): 111–13. Direct evidence of familiarity with humoral theory in Iceland comes from medical treatises which offer humoral cures and which outline the operation of the humoral system (e.g., AM 655 XXX 4to (13th c.) and Hauksbók (14th c.)).
- 7 While Mayburd explores the open body schema in terms of the perceived effects personal objects (and specifically swords) had upon their users in saga literature (“Objects and Agency in the Medieval North: The Case of Old Norse Magic Swords,” *Sredniowiecze Polskie i Powzechnie* T.12 (2020): 42–68), Kanerva examines the effects contact with the undead have on the mental and physical health of the living (“Disturbances of the Mind and Body: Effects of the Living Dead in Medieval Iceland,” *Mental (Dis)Order in Later Medieval Europe*, ed. by Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Susanna Niiranen, *Later Medieval Europe* 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 219–42). Also relevant here are several archaeological

This article builds on the above perspectives by examining the human usage of powerful stones in medieval Iceland, focusing on the applications of stones in saga literature and in the Old Norse-Icelandic lapidary tradition. Human–lithic relations in these sources offer a useful case study for engaging with conceptions of the interplay between the human and the non-human, particularly on the levels of bodily health and enhancement. At the same time, they illuminate attitudes towards materiality, agency and ontology circulating in medieval Iceland.

Despite their frequent appearance in Old Norse literature, powerful stones and their perceived impact on human health have received limited scholarly attention. Much of this interest has focused on the enigmatic *sólarsteinn*,<sup>8</sup> and whether or not it was actually used as a medieval navigational instrument.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have since moved beyond this concern to establish a historical basis for literary depictions of stones,<sup>10</sup> instead focusing on how ideas surrounding powerful stones impacted and informed literary worlds: Florian Schreck explores the abundant use of the Latinate lapidary tradition in *riddarasögur*;<sup>11</sup> Mayburd, in her article on dwarves and materiality, argues that medieval perceptions of stones (with which dwarves were

studies which examine the relationship between personhood and handling of objects in Viking Age burial acts (e.g., Julie Lund, “Connectedness with Things: Animated Objects of Viking Age Scandinavia and Early Medieval Europe,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 24.1 (2017): 89–108; and Alison Margaret Klevnäs, “‘Imbued with the Essence of the Owner’: Personhood and Possessions in the Reopening and Reworking of Viking-Age Burials,” *European Journal of Archaeology* 19.3 (2017): 456–76).

- 8 *Sólarsteinar*, minerals by which the sun could purportedly be located in an overcast sky, appear in two thirteenth-century texts, *Rauðúlfs þáttur* and *Hrafnas saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, as well as church and cloister inventories from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Árni Einarsson, “Sólarsteinninn: Tæki eða tákn,” *Gripla* 21 (2010): 296).
- 9 *Ibid.*; Thorkild Ramskou, *Solstenen – Primitiv Navigation i Norden för Kompasset* (Copenhagen: Rhodos, 1969); Peter Foote, “Icelandic *sólarsteinn* and the Medieval Background,” *Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies*, ed. by Michael Barnes, Hans Bekker-Nielsen and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, The Viking Collection 2 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1984), 140–54.
- 10 Interestingly, this concern with establishing a historical basis for depictions of the *sólarsteinn* in medieval texts parallels the earlier interest in pathologising non-normative bodies rather than considering these bodies as literary constructions, as outlined above.
- 11 “Medieval Science Fiction. The Learned Latin Tradition on Wondrous Stones in the Icelandic *Riddarasögur*” (paper presented at the Sixteenth International Saga Conference, 9–15th August 2015, University of Zurich and University of Basel); “The Old Norse Lapidary Tradition and Its Influence on the Old Icelandic *Riddarasögur*” (paper presented at Research Group for Medieval Philology, 10th April 2014, University of Bergen).

closely associated in Norse tradition) would have shaped the portrayal of dwarves in Icelandic literature.<sup>12</sup>

My analysis takes its cue in part from both these researchers: like Schreck, I consider the learned lapidary tradition alongside indigenous saga literature, and like Mayburd, I am particularly interested in medieval ideas of agency and materiality spanning the bounds of the human and non-human. Where Schreck focuses on *riddarasögur*, I broaden my scope to include other saga sub-genres (*Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*).<sup>13</sup> Where Mayburd outlines medieval scholastic debates concerning the properties of stones without analysing lapidary material extant in Iceland itself, I provide a summary of the contents of an Old Norse lapidary text from a fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript (AM 194 8vo).<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the lapidary tradition, researchers have also explored the appearance of powerful stones, and specifically *lyfsteinar* (healing stones), in saga literature. Rafael García Pérez examines the etymology and transcription of the ON noun *lyfsteinn*, demonstrating how the term originally referred to a medicinal stone (where *lyf* derives from PGmc \*lubja (herb, potion)).<sup>15</sup> *Lyfsteinn* was gradually reinterpreted via false etymology as a “life-stone,” becoming synonymous with the Mod. Icelandic *lífsteinn* of a later tradition. Brenda Prehal examines quartz/white pebbles in the archaeological and literary record as one of several case studies aimed at expounding the value of reintegrating archaeological theory with the

12 Mayburd, “Between a Rock and a Soft Place: The Materiality of Old Norse Dwarves and Paranormal Ecologies in *Fornaldarsögur*,” *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition*, ed. by Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 189–214.

13 On the concept of genre as a critical tool for Old Norse studies, as well as the validity of our current generic categories for analysing Old Norse texts, see below.

14 AM 194 8vo was written in Western Iceland in 1387, according to a scribal interjection on fol. 33v (Margaret Cormack, “The ‘Holy Bishop Licius’ in AM 194 8vo,” *Opuscula* 11 (2003): 188–92). This manuscript is chiefly discussed by scholars interested in the itinerary-text it contains, *Leiðarvísir* (see, e.g., Arngrímur Vídalín, “Óláfr Ormsson’s *Leiðarvísir* and its Context: The Fourteenth-Century Text of a Supposed Twelfth-Century Itinerary,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 117.2 (2018): 212–34).

15 “Piedras que curan e incluso resucitan a los muertos: traducción al inglés, francés y español del sustantivo *lyfsteinn* en dos textos en antiguo nórdico (*Kormáks saga* y *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*),” *Hermeneus. Revista de Traducción e Interpretación* 21 (2019): 238.

Icelandic literary corpus.<sup>16</sup> García Pérez's research is valuable in highlighting how *lyfsteinar* would have originally been anchored in a healing context; Prehal's research provides a useful overview of the appearance of propertied stones in the literary corpus.

The following discussion supplements the work of these scholars by investigating ideas of health and human–non-human relations as they are expressed in *both* the Norse lapidary tradition and in saga literature. Placing these different sources alongside one another highlights the degree to which ideas around materiality and agency, deriving from a learned continental tradition, frequently converge with and influence vernacular interests in bodily health and curative processes: this serves as a useful reminder to resist drawing strict binaries between “institutional/orthodox” literatures and “popular/heterodox” literatures, as well as between “medical” and “magical” discourses. It is more productive to focus on overlap and conversation between these apparent poles.

Medieval medical approaches to human health do not produce a mind–body dualism,<sup>17</sup> which would have been quite alien to the audiences and compilers of these texts.<sup>18</sup> But it is difficult to discuss the medieval holistic approach to human health without running up against the entrenched

16 Brenda Prehal, “Handbook for the Deceased: Re-Evaluating Literature and Folklore in Icelandic Archaeology” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2020): 184–225.

17 On concepts of the “mind” in medieval Icelandic sources, see particularly Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, “The Head, the Heart, and the Breast: Bodily Conceptions of Emotion and Cognition in Old Norse Skaldic Poetry,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 15 (2019): 40; Mackenzie, “Vernacular Psychologies,” 57–91. In the vernacular Norse tradition, cognition and emotion (faculties we typically associate with the “mind”) are perceived as embodied and adhering to a cardio-centric or pectoral (rather than cephalon-centric) model. This can be seen, e.g., in kenning-patterns for breast/chest, in which base-words refer to topographic or architectural features (enclosure, land, house etc.) and in which determinants refer to mental abilities, e.g., “stronghold of thought.” We also find evidence for the continued association of emotion and cognition with the physical organ of the heart elsewhere in saga literature (e.g., *Völsunga saga*, ch. 37; *Fóstbræðra saga* (Hauksbók-version), ch. 17; *Gísla saga*, ch. 21), eddic verse (e.g., *Atlakviða*, sts 21–25, *Atlamál in grænlensku*, sts 58–64) and *Snorra Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 17).

18 On the topic of Cartesian dualism as anachronism in the context of Old Norse literature and scholarship, see, among others, Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 8; Mayburd, “Between a Rock,” 209; Mayburd, “Objects and Agency,” 45–46; Sara Ann Knutson, “When Objects Misbehave: Materials and Assemblages in the Ancient Scandinavian Myths,” *Fabula* 61 (3–4): 258.

mind–body dualism that underlies our own culture’s Western medical institutions and that shapes the very language we use to talk about health, self and affect. In the interest of clarity for the reader, I have used modern categories (such as “physiological” and “cognitive”) in my discussion of lithotherapy, even though such categories are *not* borne out in the medieval sources themselves.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, I highlight the sheer diversity of treatments found in lapidaries and show the ultimate limitations of using modern classificatory systems to guide our understanding of medieval material.

Through the course of this article, I will consider several research questions:

1. What understandings of human health (physical and cognitive) emerge when we examine human-lithic relations?
  - a. Is a distinction drawn between, on the one hand, *healing* the body and, on the other hand, *enhancing* the body?<sup>20</sup>
  - b. Is the *mind* presented as being similarly open to change from external stimulus as the *body*?
2. How do these texts present the *operation* and *agency* of propertied stones, and does this change through time and across genres?
  - a. How do people use these stones (Are they worn next to the skin? Or consumed in a drink?) and how does their agency manifest itself?
  - b. Are stones presented as *inherently powerful*, or are they seen as *imbued with power* by humans?
3. What networks of relation between objects and bodies emerge, and what can this tell us about perceived ontological boundaries in medieval Iceland?

This article has two parts: the first examines the Old Norse lapidary text in AM 194 8vo. Here, I provide an overview of the various ideas of materiality, agency and health involved in lapidaries at large, before turning to the contents of the AM 194 8vo-lapidary to consider the range of therapies and enhancements offered by stones. Then, I briefly discuss the appearance of stones in medieval Icelandic law codes and in the archaeo-

<sup>19</sup> More on this below in the section titled “Entangled Health, Emotion and Cognition.”

<sup>20</sup> I use the term “enhancement” to refer to any medical interventions that do not address an underlying illness or symptom but rather seek to “improve” physical or mental capabilities.

logical record. This overview serves to better contextualise the subsequent discussion, in which I summarise the presentation of stones in a selection of *Íslendingasögur*, *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*.

## The Old Norse Lapidary Tradition

Lapidaries are texts documenting precious stones, their physical differences and properties, their uses and their locations in the world. There are three types of lapidary literature circulating in the medieval period, evincing a variety of approaches to how humans might find use and meaning in the non-human world: the astrological lapidary, the scientific lapidary, and the Christian symbolic lapidary.<sup>21</sup> The latter two types were, judging from manuscript evidence, the more popular. Indeed, we find evidence of both of these types in manuscripts from fourteenth-century Iceland: AM 194 8vo contains a fragmentary Christian symbolic lapidary at ff. 24v–27r, and a more comprehensive (though still partial) scientific lapidary at ff. 45v–48v. These lapidaries are translations of two independent works by the late eleventh-century Bishop Marbode of Rennes:<sup>22</sup> the former fragment is derived from an original Icelandic translation of Marbode’s *Christian Symbolic Lapidary in Prose* datable to c. 1200 on linguistic grounds;<sup>23</sup> the latter fragment is a prose translation of Marbode’s *On Stones (De Lapidibus)*, likely dating from the early thirteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Marbode’s *De Lapidibus* was a hugely influential work in the medieval lapidary genre, synthesising lore from Gaius Julius Solinus (third c. AD), Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) and especially Damigeron-Evax (second c. AD), to provide a practical guide to the therapeutic applications of stones.

Additionally, fragmentary translations of *De Lapidibus* are found in the early fourteenth-century Hauksbók manuscript compilation (f. 34r)<sup>25</sup> and

- 21 John Riddle (ed.), *Marbode of Rennes’ (1035–1123) De Lapidibus, Considered as a Medical Treatise with Text, Commentary and C. W. King’s Translation. Together with Text and Translation of Marbode’s Minor Works on Stones* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977), xi. Henceforth *De Lapidibus*.
- 22 Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson’s ars poetica and Medieval Theories of Language*, The Viking Collection 4 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987), 146.
- 23 Foote, “Icelandic Sólarsteinn,” 148.
- 24 Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, 146.
- 25 On this manuscript, see Sverrir Jakobsson, “Hauksbók and the Construction of an Icelandic World View,” *Saga-Book* 31 (2007): 22–38; Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, “Literary, Codicological and Political Perspectives on Hauksbók,” *Gripla* 19 (2008): 51–76.

the late fifteenth-century medical compilation Royal Irish Academy 23 D 43 (f. 53v).<sup>26</sup> The AM 194 8vo translation of *De Lapidibus* contains a total of nineteen stones found in Marbode's text (which contains sixty stones).<sup>27</sup> Hauksbók's fragment contains seven stones, all of which appear (though with some variation in the names and transcription of names) in AM 194 8vo, and in the same order of presentation.<sup>28</sup> RIA 23 D 43 contains two stones (both of which appear in AM 194 8vo and Hauksbók, but which appear in a different order).<sup>29</sup>

Given that the translation of *De Lapidibus* in AM 194 8vo is the most comprehensive of the Icelandic attestations of the lapidary and that it is yet to be translated into English, this is the lapidary text on which I base the following analysis.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, AM 194 8vo is a particularly interesting (and under-studied) small encyclopaedic compendium. It spans a variety of scientific and historical texts but maintains across a number of its texts a marked interest in health and the human body: from its medical treatise on ff. 37r–45v, to smaller miscellaneous texts on human embryology (f. 34v), blood-letting (f. 48v) and the number of bones, veins and teeth in the body, as well as the properties and skills assigned to specific body-parts (f. 34v).

A range of treatments is found in the AM 194 8vo lapidary. The properties of stones can be prophylactic, diagnostic, curative and palliative, providing aid for humans before, during and after the body comes into contact with injury or illness. The stones can heal and augment physical, cognitive and emotional conditions. The lapidary is therefore largely anthropocentric in focus, concerned with the ways in which stones could improve human

26 Henceforth RIA 23 D 43. On this manuscript, see Henning Larsen (ed.), *An Old Icelandic Medical Miscellany; Ms. Royal Irish Academy 23 D 43, with supplement from Ms. Trinity College (Dublin) L-2-27* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1931).

27 "Lapis," "Saffirus," "Caledonius," "Smaralldus," "Sardonix," "Onix," "Sardius," "Crisolitus," "Berillus," "Topacius," "Eirsaprassus," "Iacinctus," "Amatistus," "Crisopacius," "Geretisses," "Magnes," "Adamantis," "Illiasborius," "Saledonius." Kristian Kålund (ed.), *Alfræði Íslenzk: Íslandsk encyklopædisk Litteratur. I. Cod. Mbr. AM. 194, 8vo.* (Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1908), 77–83. Henceforth *ÁÍ*.

28 "Ematistus," "Crisopatius," "Gerathises," "Magnetis," "Adamantes," "Allectorius," "Celi-donius." Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson (eds), *Hauksbók: Udgiven efter de Arna-magnæanske håndskrifter no. 371, 544 og 675, 4<sup>o</sup> samt forskellige papirhåndskrifter* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige nordiske oldskrift-selskab, 1892–96), 227–28.

29 "Amatista" and "Adamas." *Old Icelandic Medical Miscellany*, 110.

30 NB: the Danish Harpestræng collections also contain fragmentary lapidaries; however, these are not included in the analysis since my focus is specifically on medieval Iceland.



lives. Even so, we do encounter some properties that act on the external, non-human world too. In turn, the properties of stones can be injurious rather than curative: take Onix,<sup>31</sup> which, when placed around the neck, is said to cause supernatural disturbances during sleep (“þa beR fyrir mart ohreint i svefni ok margskyns undr”) and social unrest (“aflar hann þretu ok kemr upp deilum”).<sup>32</sup> Stones can even seemingly punish human users who mishandle them; Berillus, for example, is said to burn whoever breaks it (“brennir hann brestanda”).<sup>33</sup>

Before examining the contents of the AM 194 8vo lapidary, I now briefly consider why and how lapidaries constitute a useful (if untapped) resource in Old Norse studies. Firstly, lapidaries test out ideas around *materiality* and *relationality*. They therefore help us to engage with medieval perceptions of the interplay between organic bodies and physical matter, particularly in terms of health and the body’s openness to its environment. As Mayburd notes, the way in which stones are entangled with concerns of health is indicative of a perceived vulnerability in the human condition, and thus medieval lapidaries can be regarded as “efforts to establish symbiotic relationships between the human and non-human agents in their shared environment in order to mitigate the myriad dangers to human health and welfare that the same ambivalent environment is also quite adept at conjuring.”<sup>34</sup> Mayburd is right to connect lapidaries with a notion of “paranormal contagion” that she identifies elsewhere in medieval Icelandic literature, since the operative tenet in lithotherapy is that the nature of the stone is transferred to the body of the user, implying a perceived porosity of both object and human (more on this below).

Lapidaries also raise interesting questions around *agency* and *change*: stones prompt significant therapeutic changes in human minds and bodies, but they depend on human bodies in order to manifest their agency. That this non-human agency emerges chiefly through alliance with human bodies is suggestive of a conception of (non-human) agency in this context as *distributed* across both animate and inanimate entities. This notion of

31 I refer to the names of stones as they appear in Kålund’s edition of the lapidary, rather than updating them to their modern counterparts (since not all stones have modern counterparts).

32 *Al*, 79.

33 *Al*, 80.

34 Mayburd, “Between a Rock,” 196.

agency as distributed has been theorised in new materialist scholarship, and is ultimately indebted to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory<sup>35</sup> and Jane Bennett.<sup>36</sup> More specifically, if these stones are perceived as agentic, then this agency resides in what Karen Barad has dubbed "intra-action" (a replacement term for the usual "interaction"): intra-action posits agency not as an inherent attribute of something or someone, but rather a dynamism of forces.<sup>37</sup> The collaboration between humans and stones in the lapidary tradition also extends to the treatment that human users must give the stones in order for them to work effectively, setting them in specific metals, wearing them on specific body-parts and so on.

The questions lapidaries raise over agency in turn prompt consideration of the *nature* of the stones and the *origins* of their properties. The lapidary tradition developed a specific vocabulary for discussing the agency of stones, describing their properties and potentials for action through Lat. *virtus*. This is translated in Old Norse lapidaries as *náttúra*,<sup>38</sup> which ranges in meaning from "nature, disposition" to "power, property, quality." *Náttúra* is applied elsewhere both to human and non-human entities.<sup>39</sup> The thirteenth century saw the development of the concept of "natural magic" in theological discussions on the continent, a framework combining classical ideas regarding the hidden virtues of natural matter with Christian

35 Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47.4 (1996): 369–81.

36 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Scholars have started to implement new materialist theory as a framework for engaging with Old Norse-Icelandic literature, resulting in several stimulating articles: e.g., Knutson, "When Objects Misbehave": 257–77 (on object agency in Norse mythology) and Christopher Abram, "Kennings and Things: Towards an Object-Oriented Skaldic Poetics," *The Shapes of Early English Poetry*, ed. by Eric Weiskott and Irina Dumitrescu (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019) 161–88 (on the applicability of "object-oriented ontology" to skaldic poetics).

37 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 214. Barad's "intra-action" further resonates with Laura Stark's concept of "dynamistic forces" that span both the human self and various objects and environments, developed in the context of her work on magic and the embodied self in rural early modern Finland (Laura Stark, *The Magical Self. Body, Society and the Supernatural in Early Modern Rural Finland* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2006), 254–85).

38 E.g., "hans natura," *AI*, 77; "med hans naturu," *AI*, 83.

39 See Aldis Sigurðardóttir et al., *ONP: Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o56477>.

ideas about the cosmos.<sup>40</sup> Natural magic was regarded as a consequence of God's creation of the universe and was therefore not seen as illicit, demonic or *against nature* (to use Thomas Aquinas's tripartite division of causation of the miraculous: "above nature," "beyond nature" and "against nature").<sup>41</sup> This understanding of the occult nature of stones' powers is evinced in AM 194 8vo's lapidary, which describes the stone Geretisses as having "þegianda afl eda megin."<sup>42</sup>

Surviving copies of lapidaries, both in the continental tradition<sup>43</sup> and in medieval Iceland (e.g., AM 194 8vo and RIA 23 D 43), are often bound with other medical treatises. This proximity to other texts concerned with human health and vulnerability is suggestive of, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen asserts, "the work's intimacy to medieval thinking about embodiment and disability."<sup>44</sup> Lapidaries are therefore a relevant part of discussions of medieval medical beliefs and practices, just as much as they are a useful resource for considering the more metaphysical questions of agency and matter. I return to this point later, providing a comparison of the application and operation of treatments in the AM 194 8vo's lapidary text and its medical treatise (referred to in modern scholarship as *Lækniðfræði*).

Finally, lapidaries prompt responses among their audiences. This is true on the micro-level of scribes and redactors, since, as John Riddle notes, hardly any two lapidaries among the many hundreds are alike.<sup>45</sup> And it is true on the macro-level of literary communities, since lapidary learning is implemented in saga literature (and particularly in *riddarasögur*, where the marvellous properties of stones offer narrators new opportunities for plot development).

40 Roberta Gilchrist, "The Medieval Materiality of Magic: The Ritual Lives of People and Things," *Brewminate* (12 July 2020), <https://brewminate.com/the-medieval-materiality-of-magic-the-ritual-lives-of-people-and-things/>.

41 Robert Bartlett, *Natural and Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8.

42 *Alf*, 81: "a silent/concealed strength or power." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

43 Riddle, "Lithotherapy in the Middle Ages... Lapidaries Considered as Medical Texts," *Pharmaceutical History* 12 (1970): 42.

44 *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 231.

45 *De Lapidibus*, 50.

*Entangled health, emotion and cognition in AM 194 8vo's lapidary*

The stones described in AM 194 8vo offer a range of aids to humans. This range is indicative of the degree to which ideas of health, emotion and cognition were fundamentally entangled in medical approaches to the self in this period. For example, the properties of the stone *Iacinctus* span the emotional and epidemiological: in a single sentence, the scribe tells us that the stone allows the bearer to travel freely without fear (“o-hreddr”), whilst also protecting the bearer against plagues (“eigi man þer meina drepsott”).<sup>46</sup> The range of applications of stones seen in the lapidary further reflects an understanding of both physical *and* cognitive conditions as inherently *embodied*: since mental change may be induced through physical contact with stones, the mind is therefore just as rooted in the material world as the body is and just as subject to influence and interference from this external world.

As touched on above, I organise my discussion of the range of properties stones exhibit by dividing up these properties into manufactured categories, such as physiological, social, emotional, cognitive and environmental. By employing these categories I hope to highlight how phenomena that can appear highly disparate to modern readers were, by contrast, *not* categorically distinguished between in medieval medical works: for there is nothing explicit in the lapidary text nor implicit in its organisation of material that establishes a distinction between physical, cognitive and social change, or indeed between healing and enhancing. While the categories employed are useful insofar as they may help readers grasp the sheer *diversity* of treatment types in the lapidary, future research should move beyond these categories in order to pursue a more emic perspective on medieval concepts of health and self.

*Physiological aids (curative and prophylactic)*

Stones provide cures for serious physical ailments such as bleeding (*Topacius*),<sup>47</sup> shivering fever and tumescence through water (*Lapis*),<sup>48</sup> breathing difficulties and liver-illness (*Berillus*),<sup>49</sup> burns (*Magnes*)<sup>50</sup> and

46 *Al*, 80.

47 *Ibid.*: “rauda-sott.”

48 *Al*, 77: “ridu sottum ok vatn-kalfi.” AM 194 8vo has “Lapis,” while Marbode has “Jaspis” (Jasper).

49 *Al*, 80: “andar styn [...] ok lifur-verk.”

50 *Al*, 81: “vid bruna.”

wounds and eye ailments (Saffirus).<sup>51</sup> They also help users control less desirable bodily behaviours, reducing excessive perspiration (Saffirus)<sup>52</sup> and soothing carnal lust (Smaralldus).<sup>53</sup> Stones can also act prophylactically, for example, protecting the user from poison (Smaralldus, Adamantis)<sup>54</sup> or from the inebriating effects of alcohol (Amatistus).<sup>55</sup>

*Physiological aids (enhancive)*

Stones not only treat and safeguard against specific ailments; they also enhance and modify bodily capabilities. Thus, Berillus strengthens whoever possesses it<sup>56</sup> and is effective at improving carnal love among married couples.<sup>57</sup> And Berillus is not the only stone with apparent aphrodisiac qualities; Illiasborius<sup>58</sup> makes a man “mikilmagnadan i allri kvensemí” (powerful in all lust for women)<sup>59</sup> thus sparking sexual appetite and perhaps prowess in the user. Smaralldus provides a yet more impressive enhancement (and one after the hearts of Silicon Valley elites today)<sup>60</sup> – the possibility of extending one’s lifespan.<sup>61</sup> This property does not appear in Marbode’s original; it may be a misinterpretation of Marbode’s assertion that the gem allows you to see into the future (a property which is otherwise absent in AM 194 8vo’s account of Smaralldus), or it could reflect an alternative tradition surrounding the gemstone.

*Emotional aids (curative, prophylactic and enhancive)*

Stones also provide emotional support for humans, removing fear (Iacinctus),<sup>62</sup> making people more agreeable (Saledonius)<sup>63</sup> or more gentle to-

51 *ÁÍ*, 78: “gredir hann sár ok augu.”

52 *Ibid.*: “ofur-hita ok ofur-sveita.”

53 *Ibid.*: “stodvar lostasemi.”

54 *Ibid.*: “er hann godr við eitri;” *ÁÍ*, 82: “fiRir hann leidiligu eitri.”

55 *ÁÍ*, 81: “hann er gangstadligr dreyckiu-monnum.”

56 *ÁÍ*, 79–80: “eflir hafandi.”

57 *ÁÍ*, 79: “godr hionum til astar.”

58 AM 194 8vo has “Illiasborius” (*ÁÍ*, 83); Marbode has “Alectorius” (*De Lapidibus*, 39).

59 *ÁÍ*, 83.

60 See, e.g., Adam Gabbatt, “Is Silicon Valley’s Quest for Immortality a Fate Worse than Death?” *The Guardian* (23 February 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/22/silicon-valley-immortality-blood-infusion-gene-therapy> .

61 *ÁÍ*, 78: “eykr þat efi manz.”

62 *ÁÍ*, 80.

63 *ÁÍ*, 83: “hann gerir mann [...] þokadan vel.”

wards one another (Lapis)<sup>64</sup> and preventing faint-heartedness and envy in the carrier (Saffirus).<sup>65</sup> We could also include Smaralldus's ability to sooth carnal lust here (which I have included above in physiological aids), depending on whether lust was seen as rooted in bodily behaviour or in emotional life. It seems likely, though, that no meaningful distinction was made between these two categories, especially when we consider that humoral theory regards emotions as phenomena with a physical *and* a mental dimension.<sup>66</sup>

*Social/interpersonal aids (prophylactic and enhancive)*

Stones also act on social and interpersonal environments.<sup>67</sup> For example, Saffirus prevents the user from being tricked<sup>68</sup> and facilitates peace,<sup>69</sup> while Adamantis overcomes conflicts and quarrels.<sup>70</sup> Conversely, Onix can instigate quarrels.<sup>71</sup> Stones can also impact the outcome of events for the wearer: Illiasborius is used as a “sigr-steinn” (victory-stone) to ensure victory,<sup>72</sup> while Caledonius helps the user win their law-suits.<sup>73</sup> The text does not specify whether Caledonius's impact on the external world is direct or whether it is mediated through the user; in other words, whether it works by improving the wearer's verbal acuity or whether its mere presence influences the outcome of the lawsuit, perhaps acting instead on the minds of others present.

*Cognitive/intellectual aids (curative, prophylactic and enhancive)*

Saledonius and Adamantis heal those who are *óheill* (unhealthy, not

64 *Al*, 77: “hann gerer mann þeckan fólki.”

65 *Ibid.*: “eigi ma hann ok hug-lauss vera, medan berr hann, ok eigi aufundiukr.”

66 See, e.g., Jacques Bos, “The Rise and Decline of Character: Humoral Psychology in Ancient and Early Modern Medical Theory,” *History of the Human Sciences* 22.3 (2009): 29–50.

67 These can be seen to overlap functionally with the emotional aids outlined above, since both sets are generally geared towards facilitating social harmony.

68 *Al*, 77: “eigi ma þann svikia.”

69 *Al*, 78: “hann er godr til grida.”

70 *Al*, 82: “deilur ok sennur.”

71 *Al*, 79: “aflar hann þretu ok kemr upp deilum.”

72 *Al*, 83.

73 *Al*, 78: “þa mun hafa mal sitt.” Interestingly, these properties parallel the use of “sigrúnar” (victory-runes) and “málrúnar” (speech-runes) in the eddic heroic tradition, as seen in *Sigrdrífumál* (see stanzas 7 and 13, in *Eddukvæði*, vol. II, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 314–15).

whole)<sup>74</sup> a term which, in AM 194 8vo, consistently translates the Lat. *insanos*.<sup>75</sup> The use of the term *óheill* here implies a connection between physical openness and mental illness. This chimes with various saga narratives that portray mental disorder as induced by contact with external paranormal forces.<sup>76</sup> It is interesting, then, that another stone, Crisolitus is said to frighten and drive away trolls:<sup>77</sup> this further highlights the perceived relationship between supernatural forces and human health and emphasises the degree to which humans were seen as continually subject to external influence, both involuntary (e.g., diseases, trolls etc.) and voluntary (e.g., use of stones).

Elsewhere, stones enhance cognitive and intellectual capacities: Saledonius makes people eloquent,<sup>78</sup> while Geretisses allows the user insight into the thoughts and desires of others: “ef madr hefir hann i munni ser, þa ma hann segia hvat annar hyGr um hann” (if a man holds the stone in his mouth, then he can say what another thinks about him).<sup>79</sup> The way in which this form of telepathy is achieved (by holding the stone in the mouth) is striking, especially as the phrasing emphasises the verbal nature of the telepathy (the user will “segja” (say) the thoughts of others). Perhaps the placement of the stone in the mouth is seen as allowing direct physical transfer of hidden information, mediated through the stone to the organs of speech? And the text has some ideas about how one might implement this telepathy: the bearer could use Geretisses to ascertain “hvert kona vill iata bondi eda nita” (whether a woman will accept or deny a husband)!<sup>80</sup> This description differs from Marbode’s text, which has a more predatory

74 *ÁÍ*, 83: “hann gredir oheila;” *ÁÍ*, 82: “gredir hann oheila.”

75 *De Lapidibus*, 36, 55.

76 For this relationship in the family saga tradition, see Kanerva, “Disturbances of the Mind and Body” and Miriam Mayburd, “It Was a Dark and Stormy Night: Haunted Saga Homesteads, Climate Fluctuations, and the Vulnerable Self,” *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 21–38. We can also think here of the inducing of mental disorder through environmental magic in the *fornaldarsögur* (see, e.g., *Göngu-Hrólf’s saga*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Prentverks Odds Björnssonar, 1954), vol. III, ch. 28).

77 *ÁÍ*, 79: “hredir hann troll ok rekir.” The term “troll” translates Marbode’s “demones” (*De Lapidibus*, 49).

78 *ÁÍ*, 83: “hann gerir mann malsniellan.”

79 *ÁÍ*, 81.

80 *Ibid.*

understanding of the stone's capabilities: in Marbode, the stone allows the user to make women bend to their will.<sup>81</sup> AM 194 8vo's reading, which is shared by Hauksbók's lapidary, instead emphasises the acquisition of hidden knowledge, rather than the controlling of human behaviour.

*Non-human/environmental aids*

While the majority of the stones' properties pertain to human health and capability, their virtues do not exclusively begin and end with humans. Some stones act on the material non-human world: Saffirus is able to unlock doors from inside and outside,<sup>82</sup> Smaralldus can calm the sea,<sup>83</sup> Topacius stops water from boiling.<sup>84</sup> These glimpses into the effects of stones on non-human matter suggest an understanding of agency that need not be strictly anthropocentric: while humans might be particularly concerned with harnessing stones to improve human life, this concern does not preclude the idea that these same stones could also equally act on the non-human world (though nonetheless still in ways that benefit humans).

*Operation and handling of the stones (haptic, topical/pharmaceutical and internal)*

The lapidary often stipulates conditions of usage for the stones. Sometimes, stones need merely to be adjacent to the body to work: e.g., Lapis helps pregnant women if it is "hia lagdr" (placed nearby).<sup>85</sup> More often, though, stones should be placed in direct contact with the flesh, typically worn on the body as a necklace or bracelet (e.g., Caledonius should be held on the neck or the finger;<sup>86</sup> Onix should be worn around the neck;<sup>87</sup> Adamantis on the left hand).<sup>88</sup> When stones are used in this manner, the text implies a kind of haptic transmission of the stones' properties, often contingent on the human user creating just the right conditions to unlock the stone's potentials: e.g., Lapis's full properties only manifest when it

81 *De Lapidibus*, 69.

82 *Al*, 77–78: "ok ef honum er slegit aa luktar dyR utan eda innan, þa lukaz þær upp ok aa sómo leid bónd af bandingium."

83 *Al*, 79: "kyRir hann sio."

84 *Al*, 80: "stodvar vellanda vatn."

85 *Al*, 77.

86 *Al*, 78: "aa halsi eda fingri."

87 *Al*, 79: "aa halse."

88 *Al*, 82: "aa vinstri hendi."



is set in silver;<sup>89</sup> Crisolitus will only frighten away trolls if a hole is bored through and it is strung on the hair of an ass and worn on the right arm.<sup>90</sup> At other times, a more pharmaceutical operation appears to be required: for headaches, Saffirus should be rubbed in mead (Marbode has “milk” not “mead”!) and applied to the head;<sup>91</sup> for burns, Magnes should be sprinkled on them.<sup>92</sup> These applications suggest that the stone may have been ground into a powder and then topically applied, an operation more akin to many of the medical treatments found elsewhere in AM 194 8vo’s medical treatise.<sup>93</sup>

In turn, stones sometimes require internal usage, either held inside the mouth (e.g., Iacinctus cools the body down;<sup>94</sup> Geretisses allows users to read minds)<sup>95</sup> or soaked in a liquid (water, honey, wine, mead), which is subsequently ingested. It is unclear whether in such instances the stone is ground up and dissolved in the liquid or whether it is placed whole in the liquid for a period and then removed; this method is required, e.g., for Lapis to help prevent fever and tumescence,<sup>96</sup> and Magnes, to help with dropsy.<sup>97</sup>

The *application* and *operation* of minerals in the lapidary tradition substantially overlaps with the various animal and vegetable remedies found in another text in AM 194 8vo, its medical treatise, *Læknisfræði*. This overlap supports the argument that lapidaries were considered practical, medical texts and highlights the importance of including lapidaries alongside herbals and antidotariums as evidence for medical learning in medieval Iceland. This connection is further supported by the fact that *Læknisfræði* actually contains a few sentences “um steina megin” (on the power of stones).<sup>98</sup>

89 *Al*, 77: “nema hann se i sylfri.”

90 *Al*, 79: “Ef hann er boradr ok dregit i gegnum hann asna hárf [...] hann skal bera aa vinstra arm.”

91 *Al*, 78: “ef hann er gnuinn i miod ok aa ridinn.”

92 *Al*, 81: “ef þu stóckvir á med honum.”

93 E.g., treatments for hair and beard growth, one of which involves goat-hooves and manure, burnt and crushed with sour wine and then applied to the head (*Al*, 65).

94 *Al*, 80: “er hann kalldare.”

95 See footnote 79.

96 *Al*, 77: “ef madr dreckr af honum.”

97 *Al*, 81: “ef druckit er af honum i vatni.”

98 *Al*, 75.

The contents of *Læknisfræði* intersect with those in a late fifteenth-/early sixteenth-century Icelandic manuscript, AM 434 a 12mo (although the ordering of the material is different) and with the fifteenth-century RIA 23 D 43 (again, with different ordering).<sup>99</sup> Parts of *Læknisfræði* also find parallels in the work of thirteenth-century Danish canon Henrik Harpestræng, who is known for introducing Salernitan medical concepts into Scandinavia.<sup>100</sup>

AM 194 8vo's *Læknisfræði* contains a range of treatments, both curative and enhanceive. The curative treatments, like those in the lapidary, address physiological symptoms and ailments (e.g., toothache,<sup>101</sup> dysentery,<sup>102</sup> burns,<sup>103</sup> spider bites,<sup>104</sup> weak-sightedness<sup>105</sup> etc.), just as they can improve or alter cognitive function (e.g., incense is used to improve one's memory).<sup>106</sup> Other enhanceive therapies include the ingestion of salvia "til biartrar radar" (for a clear voice),<sup>107</sup> an outcome which does not necessarily presuppose an underlying ailment to treat or symptom to alleviate. Also relevant is the use of "pistinaca" (parsnip?) to attract a man to a woman,<sup>108</sup> which parallels Illiasborius's ability to make a man "powerful in all lust for women."<sup>109</sup>

Like the lapidary stones, *Læknisfræði*'s remedies can be applied topically as well as taken internally. Typically, topical treatments are used for ailments that are visible and reside on the surface of the body (e.g., wounds, bites etc.) while ingested treatments are used for internal ailments (e.g., fever, poisoning, urinary retention etc.). This pattern is similarly seen

99 In RIA 23 D 43, the compiler, or one of his sources, attempted to group entries for the same illness together and arrange entries in order from head to feet.

100 Ben Waggoner (ed. and trans.), *Norse Magical and Herbal Healing. A Medical Book from Medieval Iceland* (New Haven, CT: Troth, 2011), xxxvi. Also relevant here is the Icelandic physician Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, who travelled extensively in Europe and whose saga reflects familiarity with Salernitan medical practices in late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Iceland.

101 *Al*, 64, 73.

102 *Al*, 68–69.

103 *Al*, 73.

104 *Al*, 74.

105 *Al*, 64, 68.

106 *Al*, 67.

107 *Al*, 72.

108 *Al*, 68: "Etr madr mikít af henne, þa fysir mann til konu."

109 See footnote 59.

in the lapidary. And just as we find stones operating through physical contact with the body, so too do we find treatments in *Læknisfræði* that appear to involve haptic transmission: for example, binding a “blóð cauli” (caulis leaf) on the right foot of a pregnant woman facilitates childbirth.<sup>110</sup> Another example is a headache treatment, which implies a kind of sympathetic correspondence between curative item and bodily impairment:

sker horn af hófde kvikfi[ar] ok ger af kamb, ok kember karllmadr ser med karlkendu kvikendis horni, en kona med ber-kvikendis horni.<sup>111</sup>

(cut the horn from the head of livestock and make a comb from it, and comb a male person with the horn of a male animal, but a woman with a horn from a female animal.)

The treatment operates through direct contact between the animal-horn comb and the human head. There are two sets of correspondences: first, the correspondence in bodily register between the location of the human ailment (headache) and the location of animal ingredient (horn). Secondly, the efficacy of the comb relies on a correspondence between the sex of the human user of the comb and the sex of the animal supplying the material for the comb. The operation of this treatment therefore tells us two things about the perceived relationship between human bodies and non-human entities (both objects and animals): the animal-object (comb) retains the sexed identity of the animal, and animal maleness and femaleness is perceived on the same level as human maleness and femaleness.

In this section, I have discussed the Old Norse lapidary tradition and argued for its relevance to discussions of medieval conceptions of health and agency. I focused on AM 194 8vo’s translation of *De Lapidibus*, outlining the range of properties that stones exhibit in this text. I found that stones heal physiological ailments, alter emotional states, treat mental illnesses, facilitate one’s social interactions, enhance bodily and cognitive capabilities and occasionally act on the non-human world. I also analysed *how* stones work, finding that they need to be worn in close proximity to the flesh; powdered and applied topically to ailments; or ingested with

<sup>110</sup> *Al*, 76.

<sup>111</sup> *Al*, 75. This treatment also appears in RIA 23 D 43 and in AM 434 a.

a liquid. I further compared the application and operation of lapidary stones with the remedies found in *Lækniþfræði*: I found that *Lækniþfræði* likewise provided aids for physiological and cognitive conditions and that *Lækniþfræði*'s remedies similarly could be applied topically or taken internally.

## Beyond the Lapidary Tradition: Stones in Medieval Iceland

I now examine the appearance of powerful stones in saga literature. I use a range of *Íslendingasögur*, *foraldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*<sup>112</sup> to consider the degree to which the properties of stones in sagas intersect with those seen in the lapidary tradition. This intersection can signal a compatibility in approaches to material human–non-human relations, shared by the continental learned lapidary tradition and the vernacular Icelandic tradition. It can also signal direct influence from the lapidary tradition, particularly in the case of *riddarasögur*. I also consider how stones operate in saga literature and what this tells us about ideas of agency and the perceived boundaries between humans and objects.

### *Contextualising propertied stones: law codes and archaeology*

Where natural magic provides a conceptual framework for engaging with the lapidary tradition, the presentation of stones in saga literature can also be contextualised through medieval Icelandic law codes and the archaeological record. A reference to the use of powerful stones appears in the Christian Laws section of *Grágás*.<sup>113</sup> The two principal manuscripts containing *Grágás* material are GKS 1157 fol. and AM 344 fol. (both dating from the second half of the thirteenth century), and there is considerable

112 The *Íslendingasögur* I discuss below are preserved either fragmentarily or in toto in manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries onwards. The *foraldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* are preserved fragmentarily or in toto in manuscripts from the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onwards. On the issue of dating saga texts and the relationship between textual chronologies and generic distinctions, see discussion below.

113 *Grágás* refers not to a unified code of law nor a single manuscript, but the “laws of the Icelandic Commonwealth [...] in sources originating before [...] 1262–64.” Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins (trans.), *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás, the Codex Regius of Grágás, with Material from Other Manuscripts*, 2 vols (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 1:9.

variation between these textual witnesses.<sup>114</sup> Given the complexity of *Grágás's* textual tradition, it is difficult to draw solid conclusions from *Grágás* concerning legal practices in the thirteenth century, especially since many of the laws in these manuscripts were no longer in practice then. Nonetheless, *Grágás* does preserve important legal concepts that may still have informed people's understanding of particular behaviours and social responsibilities. This is especially true for the Christian Laws section, the section which addresses the use of gemstones: this section was not superseded by anything in *Járnsíða* or *Jónsbók*, the two codes presented to Icelanders by the Norwegian king after the incorporation of Iceland into the Norwegian Realm in 1262–64. This meant that “the demand for the old church laws thus continued well into the fourteenth century.”<sup>115</sup>

In the Christian Laws section, prohibitions surrounding the use of stones appear following the prohibitions against heathen worship and the practising of magic on livestock and people, and before the legal handling of berserk frenzies. This placement associates the use of stones with pre-Christian behaviours. The statement reads as follows:

*Menn scolo eigi fara með steina. eða magna þa til þess at binda á menn eða a fé manna. Ef meN trva a steina til heilindis ser. eða fé. oc varþar fiorbaugs Garþ.*<sup>116</sup>

(People should not use stones or empower them in order to attach them to people or livestock. If people believe in stones for their health or for the health of their livestock, the penalty is lesser outlawry.)

There are several points to note in this statement. Firstly, the text is equivocal in its understanding of the origin of stones' powers: on the one hand, stones could potentially have latent inherent properties (since people should not “fara með” stones); on the other hand, they could be filled with power (“magna”) by humans. Secondly, the text suggests stones work through physical contact with bodies, “binda á” people and livestock. This aligns with how stones typically operate in the lapidary tradition, and also

114 E.g., the relevant Christian Laws section only appears in GKS 1157, and not AM 344.

115 Dennis, Foote and Perkins, *Laws*, 16.

116 *Grágás: Konungsbók*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Odense: Universitetsforlag, 1974), 23.

parallels the phrasing used in *Laxdæla saga* to refer to the *lyfsteinn* that accompanies the sword *Sköfnungr*: “tekr þá Sköfnungs-stein ok ríðr ok *bindr við* hönd Gríms, ok tók þegar allan sviða ok þrota ór sárinu” (then he takes the Sköfnungr-stone and rubs it and *binds it on* Grímr’s hand, and immediately it took all the pain and swelling out of the wound).<sup>117</sup> Thirdly, the use of stones is explicitly associated with the preservation and manipulation of “heilendi” (health) and with non-Christian faith (the law punishes those who “trva” (believe) in stones). And fourthly, stones can be used on both humans and animals (something on which the literary record is otherwise silent: stones are used, as far as I am aware, exclusively on human bodies).

While *Grágás* clearly codes the use of powerful stones as illicit, their sustained appearance in the literature from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries nonetheless indicates that they continued to pique the interest of narrators and audiences, providing a useful narrative tool. As mentioned above, natural magic offered a framework for lapidaries which did not condemn the lore of stones as demonic or heretical, but rather understood the power of stones as a consequence of God’s creation of the universe. In turn, Christian symbolism was often implemented in lapidary texts (such as the “Merking steina” fragment preserved also in AM 194 8vo), focusing on the symbolism of gems mentioned in the Bible. Perhaps, then, when lapidaries began circulating in medieval Iceland in the fourteenth century, they were contextualised by this Christian framework that made allowances for scholarly interest in powerful stones.

It is therefore instructive to compare the *Grágás* prohibitions to the textual record (and specifically to lapidaries): the former places the use of stones in the context of illicit, pre-Christian beliefs; the latter in the context of Latinate learning, authorised, to a certain degree, by the Church. This contrast serves to remind us that an interest or belief in the power of stones was not always the province of “lay” communities (as *Grágás* perhaps suggests), but something increasingly shared, though in different forms, with monastic communities. It is particularly interesting, for example, that the excavation of Reykholt’s churches produced one of the

<sup>117</sup> *Laxdæla saga*, in *Laxdæla saga, Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar, Stúfs þáttur*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), 215. My emphasis.

largest and most diverse assemblages of lithic objects from any Icelandic archaeological site, spanning jasper, opal, chalcedony and obsidian finds. As many as 153 lithic finds were recovered from deposits at Reykholt's churches from the twelfth century through to the post-Reformation period, and their accumulation and deposition peaks in the late twelfth to thirteenth centuries.<sup>118</sup>

The most significant factor differentiating Reykholt's assemblage from other Icelandic lithic assemblages is the colour of the stones: 91.5 per cent of the pieces recovered from the church excavations are varying degrees of green, and this preference for green-coloured stone was consistently maintained for 400 years or more. Drawing on medieval science and Christian doctrine, Kevin Brown suggests that green stones could have been selected due to jasper's status as a symbol of faith in the lapidary tradition (as a stone which represented the Church itself, and which was believed to protect individuals from demonic influence), and also due to its associations with the church's patron Saint Peter.<sup>119</sup>

The mortuary record similarly evinces the *continuing* significance of stones to bodies. Precious stones are found in many pre-Christian burials of both men and women in Iceland: some of these have a hole bored through them, suggesting that they were hung on the body,<sup>120</sup> others are found near the hips of the deceased, suggesting that they were carried in small pouches on a belt.<sup>121</sup> In her dissertation, Prehal observes the presence of quartz, feldspar, opal, zeolite and calcite in pre-Christian Scandinavian graves, focusing specifically on the association of quartz with the dead, an association which continues in some Christian burials.<sup>122</sup> While we cannot know what functions the people buried with these stones believed they had, the literary evidence suggests the properties may have pertained

118 Kevin Brown, "The Colour of Belief: Objects of Jasper, Opal, Chalcedony, and Obsidian from the Reykholt Churches," *Reykholt. The Church Excavations*, ed. by Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2016), 232.

119 *Ibid.*, 240–41.

120 Jón Steffensen, "Aspects of Life in Iceland in the Heathen Period," *Saga-Book* 17.2–3 (1967–68): 192–93.

121 Elisabeth Ward, "Nested Narrative: *Þórðar saga hreðu* and Material Engagement" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012): 47.

122 E.g., at the medieval cemetery at Hofstaðir, where two quartz pebbles are placed in the mouth of a skull. Quartz is also found in other Christian contexts, such as at the medieval monastery site at Skriðuklaustur in Skagafjörður (Prehal, "Handbook," 213–14).

to bodily health. A belief or interest in lithotherapy perdured in various forms and to various degrees from the pre-Christian period well into the sixteenth century, where we find a reference to a stone that eases childbirth in an inventory list of the cathedral church at Hólar.<sup>123</sup>

*Propertied stones in Íslendingasögur, Fornaldarsögur and Riddarasögur*

I now discuss the various properties of stones in sagas grouped within the sub-genres of *Íslendingasögur*, *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*. These sub-genres belong to a post-medieval classificatory system,<sup>124</sup> whose validity has come under scrutiny in recent years.<sup>125</sup> While, as Massimiliano Bampi suggests, the widespread employment of these categories in research evidences their heuristic value,<sup>126</sup> the taxonomy is nonetheless limited in its rigidity<sup>127</sup> and its retrospectivity.<sup>128</sup> The problem of genre overlaps with the issue of proposed chronologies of Icelandic saga production. It is particularly difficult to date saga texts, both due to the possibility that earlier versions of sagas may have existed in written or oral form, and due to the nature of the surviving manuscript evidence.<sup>129</sup> Where earlier

123 Jón Steffensen, "Aspects," 195–96.

124 This taxonomy is based largely around distinctions in texts' geographical settings, chronologies and subject matters. See Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 72–3; Dale Kedwards, "Geography," *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre*, ed. by Massimiliano Bampi, Carolyne Larrington and Sif Rikhardsdóttir (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020) 127–44; Torfi H. Tulinius, "Time and Space," *A Critical Companion*, 145–60.

125 See, e.g., Judy Quinn et al., "Interrogating Genre in the *Fornaldarsögur*: Round-Table Discussion," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2005): 275–96; Clunies Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, 13–36; Massimiliano Bampi, "Genre," *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–11; Bampi, Larrington and Sif Rikhardsdóttir (eds), *A Critical Companion*.

126 Bampi, "Genre," 5.

127 Since it does not allow for the hybridity of those sagas which appear to defy generic distinction within this system. See Sif Rikhardsdóttir, "Hybridity," *A Critical Companion*, 31–46.

128 E.g., the majority of the labels we give to these sub-groupings are not attested in medieval sources, just as the compositional criteria we use to distinguish distinct generic identities are constructed by modern scholars.

129 There are very few manuscripts of sagas pre-dating the thirteenth century, with the majority of works extant solely in manuscripts dating to the second half of the fourteenth century or later (Clunies Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, 57–8). On approaches to and issues



scholarship viewed saga genres evolutionarily and hierarchically (with classical *Íslendingasögur* representing a golden age of saga production in the thirteenth century, and *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* reflecting the literary decline of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), the consensus increasingly is that different sub-groups of the Icelandic saga developed contemporaneously and continued to interact with one another.<sup>130</sup> My analysis therefore uses these scholarly sub-groupings loosely, to point to areas of difference and similarity in the presentation of stones across a wide range of sagas. The flexibility of stones as a motif across sagas is suggestive of the “multimodal” and open nature of the genre of the medieval saga at large, in which there is varied interaction and permeability between different literary “sub-groups.”<sup>131</sup>

There are multiple traditions concerning the use of propertied stones in saga literature. These traditions are informed by what appear to be vernacular concepts of healing stones and learned, continental interest in the diverse virtues of stones, as codified textually in lapidaries.<sup>132</sup> Stones vary in their properties (stones can heal, harm, bring victory, protect the body from external injury, render the user invisible or facilitate clairvoyance etc.), just as they vary in their operation (applied directly to wounds, worn around the neck etc.).

In *Íslendingasögur*, stones are used for therapeutic and prophylactic purposes. Often, these stones are *lyfsteinar* (as in *Kormáks saga* and *Laxdæla saga*), associated with specific swords and bearing curative properties that apply only to wounds inflicted by the swords to which they belong.<sup>133</sup> However, we do also see stones with protective functions, worn round the

involved in dating *Íslendingasögur*, see *Dating the Sagas*, ed. by Else Mundal (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2013).

130 Clunies Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, 70; Bampi, “Genre,” 7.

131 On the term multimodality in the context of genre, see especially Sif Rikhardsottir, “Hybridity,” 34–41; Bampi, “Genre,” 7, and Clunies Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, 70.

132 While this section is focused on stones in saga literature, it is nonetheless interesting to note that an additional tradition surrounding the use of stones is also preserved in eddic poetry, where stones appear to be associated with the swearing of oaths (see *Guðrúnarkviða III*, sts 3, 9, in *Eddukvæði II*, 362–63).

133 *Kormáks saga* in *Vatnsdæla saga, Hallfreðar saga, Kormáks saga, Hrómundar þáttr halta, Hrafn þáttr Guðrúnarsonar*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslensk fornrit 8* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), chs. 9, 12, 13; *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 57–58.

neck.<sup>134</sup> In *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, stones are used for therapeutic purposes and exhibit varied magical agencies that lean more towards enhancement than healing. In *fornaldarsögur*, stones continue to protect the body from mortal blows<sup>135</sup> and treat bodily injuries: *lyfsteinar* still feature, but with more flexible attributes and generalised operation than seen in *Íslendingasögur*. Here, *lyfsteinar* can heal any wounds, not just those inflicted by the sword with which they are associated, and they can also draw poison out of wounds (a common attribute of stones in the AM 194 8vo lapidary),<sup>136</sup> as in *Göngu-Hrólf's saga*.<sup>137</sup> In addition to stones that aid health, we also find *sigrsteinar* (victory-stones).<sup>138</sup> These ensure that the user cannot lose in battle and find parallels in the lapidaries of Hauksbók and AM 194 8vo (where Illiasborius is described as an “oruGr sigr-steinn” (trusty victory-stone)).<sup>139</sup> In turn, some stones act on both the user and their external environment, again with parallels in the Icelandic lapidaries: in *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*,<sup>140</sup> a dwarf gives Þorsteinn two stones. The first is a black stone that, when held in the palm of the hand, turns the user invisible; the second, a large triangular tricolour stone accompanied by a steel point, which induces different environmental and weather phenomena (hailstorm, sunshine, fire) when pricked by the point. The abilities to turn the user invisible and to influence weather/environment are shared by Heliotrope in the lapidary tradition.<sup>141</sup>

In *riddarasögur*, there is less focus on curative stones, and more interest in marvellous stones that afford the user enhanced physical and cognitive abilities. These marvellous properties provide narrators with colourful and varied opportunities for narrative development. Particularly popular are

134 *Heiðarvíga saga*, in *Borgfirðingasögur*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), ch. 23.

135 E.g., an episode in *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinnssonar* (in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, vol. IV) closely parallels that in *Heiðarvíga saga*, see chs. 16, 18, 20.

136 Cf. Adamantis and Smaralldus.

137 Chs. 3, 24. The *lyfsteinar* in *Göngu-Hrólf's saga* may exhibit further influence from the lapidary tradition, since the narrator states that they draw poison and pain out of wounds “ef í váru skafnir” (if they [the *lyfsteinar*] were shaved into) (*Göngu-Hrólf's saga*, 169). This may refer to scraping shavings from the stone onto the wound, in a manner reminiscent of the therapeutic properties of stones when powdered in the lapidary tradition.

138 *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, vol. III, ch. 16.

139 *Alf*, 83.

140 In *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, vol. IV, ch. 3.

141 *De Lapidibus*, 67–68. NB: this stone does not appear in the AM 194 8vo lapidary.

stones that render the user invisible (e.g., in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, *Nítíða saga*, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, *Vilhjálmss saga sjóðs*), that allow the user to gain sway over others (*Gibbons saga*) or to see throughout the world (*Nítíða saga*, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, *Gibbons saga*). The influence of the lapidary tradition (whether direct or indirect) is altogether more overt in *riddarasögur*, which make use of lapidary learning both as a narrative tool and as a means of adding colour and erudition to the texts. For example, *Flóvents saga I* contains a list of twelve stones decorating an item of clothing that reads as though it were directly lifted from a lapidary: “cristallvs, smaragdvs, iaspis, anetistis [...] saphirvs, carbvnculcs, sardivs, crisolitvs [...] topacivs, crisopacivs, berillvs, iacingtvs” (crystal, emerald, jasper, amethyst, [...] there was sapphire, carbuncle, sardius, chrysolite [...] topaz, chrysoprase, beryl, hyacinth).<sup>142</sup> The appeal of lapidary stones to *riddarasögur* narrators may in turn stem from shared textual, geographical settings: the distant and exoticised locations of gemstones in the lapidary (e.g., Greece,<sup>143</sup> Caldea,<sup>144</sup> India,<sup>145</sup> Egypt,<sup>146</sup> Sardis<sup>147</sup> and Ethiopia)<sup>148</sup> often provide the backdrops for the action of *riddarasögur*.<sup>149</sup>

Nonetheless, elements of the *lyfsteinn* tradition (seen elsewhere in *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*) are also seen in *riddarasögur*, as in the description of Sigurðr’s sword in *Sigurðar saga þögla*:

uar einn litill punngur festur vit medalkaflann og þar j lyfsteinn  
Raudur ath lit. og ef hann war aa Ridinn vid vijn og borinn suo aa

<sup>142</sup> *Flóvents saga I*, in *Fornsögur Suðrlanda*, ed. by Gustaf Cederschiöld (Lund: F. Berlings boktryckeri, 1884) 142. Lapidary lore is also implemented in *Thómas saga Erkibyskups*, a *heilagramanna saga* found in a fourteenth-century manuscript. An episode relates how Thomas Beckett asks Charlemagne for his ring, encrusted with a giant, glowing carbuncle grown beneath a unicorn horn. *Thomas saga Erkibyskups: Fortelling om Thomas Becket Erkebiskop af Canterbury: To bearbejdelser samt Fragmenter af en tredie*, ed. by Carl Unger (Christiana: Bentzen, 1867), ch. 71.

<sup>143</sup> Saffirus (*ÁÍ*, 77).

<sup>144</sup> Smaralldus (*ÁÍ*, 78).

<sup>145</sup> Sardonix, Onix, Berillus, Eirsaprasus, Amatistus and Magnes (*ÁÍ*, 79–81).

<sup>146</sup> Onix (*ÁÍ*, 79).

<sup>147</sup> Sardius (*ÁÍ*, 79).

<sup>148</sup> Crisolitus and Crisopacius (*ÁÍ*, 79, 81).

<sup>149</sup> While beyond the scope of the present article, the relationship between lapidary lore, textual geographies and the properties of saga stones merits further investigation.

eitrad saar þaa dro þat vr allt eituro.<sup>150</sup>

(a small bag is tied to the hilt in which there is a red healing stone: if wine is applied to it, and it is laid upon a poisoned wound, all the poison is drawn out.)

On the one hand, the *lyfsteinn* is comparable with the *lyfsteinar* of *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormáks saga*: it is associated with a sword, it heals wounds, and it is kept in a pouch near the sword's hilt. On the other hand, the description and operation of the healing shows influence from the lapidary tradition: specifically, the use of stones to draw poison from wounds, and the application of alcohol to the stone to trigger its operation (cf., e.g., Saffirus in AM 194 8vo, which, when rubbed in mead, cures headaches).<sup>151</sup>

As suggested by this brief overview, the scope of functions of stones in saga literature is similar to that in the lapidary tradition: stones can be used not only for healing but for protecting and enhancing the body. In turn, the range of ways in which stones are applied in saga literature parallels the range seen in lapidaries: stones operate through their proximity to humans (either worn on an item of clothing<sup>152</sup> or strung around the neck)<sup>153</sup> or are applied directly to wounds.<sup>154</sup> The sagas are generally silent on the origin of stones' powers, with the exception of those *Íslendingasögur* in which characters treat stones with a degree of suspicion, aligning them with pre-Christian activities: e.g., *Kormáks saga*, in which both Kormákr and Steinarr regard magical practices/supernatural forces with contempt (including *lyfsteinar*, see chapters 11 and 12), or *Heiðarvíga saga*, in which it is implied that the old woman who gives Bárði the necklace has imbued the stones with power.<sup>155</sup>

The operation of the stones in *Kormáks saga* and in *Laxdæla saga* is suggestive of the same porousness of stone and body seen in the lapidary

150 *Sigurðar saga þögla*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 5 vols, ed. by Agnete Loth, Editiones Arnarnagænanæ B 21 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962–65), 2:139.

151 *Al*, 78.

152 As in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*.

153 As in *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*, *Kormáks saga* (on this instance in *Kormáks saga*, see below).

154 As in *Laxdæla saga*, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, *Kormáks saga*.

155 See ch. 25; see also ch. 30, where, when Þorbjörn's sword fails to bite Bárði's neck on account of the necklace, Þorbjörn calls Bárði a *tröll*, a term that often carries connotations of witchcraft.

tradition, which allows for the transmission of properties via physical contact. This transmission involves a relationship not only between wounded body and curative object but also between the *lyfsteinn* and sword. When *lyfsteinar* are mentioned, they are typically mentioned in association with a sword. This is true both for *Íslendingasögur* (see *Kormáks saga* and *Laxdæla saga*) and for *fornaldarsögur* (see *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*) as well as *riddarasögur* (see *Sigurðar saga þögla*). In *Kormáks saga*, we are told that “Bersi átti þat sverð, er Hvítingr hét, bitrt sverð, ok fylgði lyfsteinn” (Bersi had a sword which was called Hvítingr, the sharpest sword, and it was accompanied by a healing stone).<sup>156</sup> The same verb (“fylgja”) is used in *Laxdæla saga* concerning the relationship between the sword Sköfnungr and its *lyfsteinn*: “ef maðr fær sár af sverðinu, þá má þat sár eigi græða, nema lyfsteinn sá sé riðinn við, er þar fylgir” (if a man gets a wound from the sword, then that wound will not heal, unless that the stone that accompanies the sword is rubbed on it).<sup>157</sup> *Laxdæla saga* further stresses the intimate relationship between stone and sword in the following chapter, in which the *lyfsteinn* is called “Sköfnungs-stein” (Sköfnungr’s stone),<sup>158</sup> the use of the genitive indicating the sword’s ownership of the stone.

The special curative relationship between *lyfsteinn* and sword appears to have been based on physical proximity, since the stones are kept on the hilt. This suggests that the stones’ gain their potency through a form of material sympathetic medicine: the homeopathic model of *similia similibus curantur* (“like cures like,” “cause as cure” or, in more contemporary parlance, “hair of the dog”). There are two features that suggest this in *Kormáks saga*. Firstly, when Kormákr borrows Sköfnungr from Skeggi, Skeggi cautions Kormákr not to remove the *lyfsteinn*-pouch from Sköfnungr: “pungur fylgir, ok skaltu hann kyrran láta” (a pouch accompanies it, and you should leave it untouched).<sup>159</sup> When Kormákr inevitably does tear the pouch from the hilt, “Sköfnungr grenjar þá við ok gengr eigi ór slíðrunum” (Sköfnungr cries out at this and does not come out of the scabbard).<sup>160</sup> That the sword cries out in response to Kormákr ripping

156 *Kormáks saga*, 234.

157 *Laxdæla saga*, 214.

158 *Ibid.*, 215.

159 *Kormáks saga*, 235. Note again the use of the verb *fylgja* to describe the relationship between stone and sword.

160 *Ibid.*

the pouch from its hilt suggests not only that the sword is perceived as animate<sup>161</sup> but that the stone is an *essential* part of the sword, since its removal is experienced by the sword as a kind of personal injury. Secondly, when Kormákr is injured by Bersi's sword Hvítíngur (which is also accompanied by a *lyfsteinn*), Bersi later offers to "grœða" (heal/cure) Kormákr, presumably with the *lyfsteinn*. Kormákr refuses, and has his mother heal his hand instead. The wound soon swells and becomes infected, suggesting that it *cannot* be healed properly without access to the sword's *lyfsteinn*.<sup>162</sup>

Mayburd has written persuasively on artefact contagion in Old Norse narratives, focusing on how the personhood of previous owners of an object is transferred into that object, and how this transferral can result in "loaded" or haunted artefacts (as, e.g., in *Kumlbúa þáttur*).<sup>163</sup> In addition to this understanding of objects becoming extensions of the owner's self, the case of swords and their *lyfsteinar* suggests that artefact contagion could operate not just between humans and objects but also between objects and other objects. *Lyfsteinar*, kept on or near the hilt of their swords, are able to cure wounds inflicted by their swords due to a process of contact contamination. Agency is distributed across a reciprocal network of objects and humans (sword, stone and human): the human is therefore just one actant within a wider material network.

Though this intimate relationship between *lyfsteinn* and sword is preserved in *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormáks saga*, in the latter there is more flexibility in the narrator's treatment of the *lyfsteinn*. The narrator initially presents the *lyfsteinn* as a stone that is associated with and kept on or near a sword and that is capable of curing wounds inflicted by that sword. However, in a later episode, the *lyfsteinn* appears in a more general, amuletic role. Bersi competes at swimming with Steinarr, and the prose narration tells us that he wore his *lyfsteinn* (which was first introduced in association with his sword, Hvítíngur) in a pouch around his neck. Steinarr

161 The sword's vocality may be taken from verse 32, which zoomorphises the sword as a howling bear. This presentation of swords as vocal agents chimes with the skaldic kenning pattern in which battle is framed as a verbal dispute between weapons, using base words that refer to speech/song and determinants that refer to weaponry (e.g., "the song of swords"). Sköfnungr also groans ("gnista") and speaks ("kveða") loudly when it cuts through flesh in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. by Desmond Slay, Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ B 1 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1960), 115–16.

162 *Kormáks saga*, 241.

163 Mayburd, "Objects and Agency," 56–57.

rips the stone from Bersi's neck and throws it into the water, speaking a verse which somewhat contradicts the prose: "battk aldri mér/ belg at hálsi/ urtafullan, – /þó ek enn lifi" (I never bound a bag to my neck, full of herbs, yet I still live).<sup>164</sup> The prose then explains that Steinarr removed the *lyfsteinn* at Þórðr's advice so that Bersi would struggle more in the duel.

It seems that the *lyfsteinn* being hung round Bersi's neck (rather than the sword's hilt) is a result of the narrator/redactor's misinterpretation of the *belgr urtafullr* (bag filled with herbs) in the verse as referring to Bersi's *lyfsteinn*. This conflation of *lyfsteinn* and *belgr urtafullr* could be accidental (and therefore perhaps indicative of a connection between the curative properties of stones and of herbs kept in pouches: recall that the first element of the compound, *lyf-*, does derive from PGmc \**lubja* (herb, potion)). Or, it could be motivated, as O'Donoghue suggests, by an effort to forge a link between Steinarr and Þórðr, a "factitious device [...] to hold together narrative elements."<sup>165</sup> Þórðr ultimately returns the *lyfsteinn* to Bersi so that Bersi's wounds heal; in this way, the *lyfsteinn* is incorporated into the narrative of friction and friendship between the two men.

In *Kormáks saga*, then, the narrator presents two inconsistent understandings of the *lyfsteinn*: the first involves a conception of the *lyfsteinn* (seen also in *Laxdæla saga*) as the only cure to a wound inflicted by the sword to which it belongs. The second involves an alternative conception of the *lyfsteinn*, which continues to present the *lyfsteinn* as curative but which disregards the *similia similibus curantur* link between stone and sword. Instead, the stone is worn around the neck and is able to cure any wound (since Bersi uses it to heal the wound he receives from Steinarr's sword, not from Hvítingr).

## Human-lithic relations in medieval Iceland: some conclusions

Propertied stones in medieval Icelandic literature offer us insight into contemporary ideas of human health and medicine, physical and cognitive change, and the myriad relationships between humans and the external

<sup>164</sup> *Kormáks saga*, 249.

<sup>165</sup> *Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormáks saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 95.

world. Examining lapidaries alongside the presentation of stones in saga literature highlights the degree to which attitudes towards materiality and agency in the learned, continental tradition were compatible with, and converged with, those from vernacular saga tradition, reminding us to think both across and beyond binaries (particularly institutional/popular, medical/magical).

This discussion has focused both on human–lithic relations in the Old Norse-Icelandic lapidary tradition and in the saga narrative tradition, and the chief findings can be summarised as follows. The porous nature of stones and bodies involved in lapidary lore preserved in AM 194 8vo suggests an understanding of humans as *entangled with*, rather than separate from, their external world. This entanglement brings with it dangers as well as opportunities for enhanceive change: the body is at once vulnerable to illness and injury and open to changes that could afford new capabilities. Lapidaries make no significant distinction between the act of *healing* the body and the act of *enhancing* the body. Nor do they suggest that the mind should be any less susceptible to change through agentive stones than the body is (thereby highlighting the limits of using modern dichotomic approaches to human health when discussing medieval medical material).

The human–lithic relations involved in lapidaries prompt questions concerning agency and materiality. Though they exhibit a non-human agency, this agency can only manifest through material interaction with human bodies. Lapidaries therefore present a conception of agency as distributed, residing in “intra-action”; such a conception complicates the boundaries between what is perceived as “inanimate” and “animate.” In terms of their application, lapidaries present stones that operate in a variety of ways, either in a “pharmaceutical” manner (applied topically to an ailment or ingested) or through haptic transmission (worn on the flesh or held in the mouth, whereby the *náttúra* of the stone temporarily transfers to the body of the user).

Lapidaries should be viewed as a part of the medical tradition in medieval Iceland: this is supported not only by the appearance of Icelandic lapidaries in manuscripts also containing medical material but by the fact that the application and operation of stones mirror the application and operation of the remedies recorded in AM 194 8vo’s medical text (*Læknisfræði*). *Læknisfræði* similarly contains treatments that span



the curative and enhancive, the physiological and the cognitive. While *Læknisfræði*'s remedies are more often applied topically or ingested as a concoction, we nonetheless also see treatments that rely on the idea of haptic transmission, suggesting that this principle of porosity was operational in the medical tradition also.

While *Grágás* codes the use of stones as illicit, their sustained appearance in saga literature indicates their continuing interest to narrators and audiences: stones are useful for developing both plot and theme, allowing narrators to explore ideas about health, agency and the entanglement between humans and their environment. In turn, the appearance of precious stones in the archaeological record suggests the enduring significances (ritual, medical, symbolic) of stones to bodies, both in pre-Christian and Christian contexts.

The appearance of stones in saga literature is informed by multiple traditions. On the one hand, we have what appears to be a vernacular *lyfsteininn* tradition (employed particularly in *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormáks saga*). This vernacular tradition involves a unique relationship between stone and sword. The stone is kept on the hilt of the sword (either in a pouch or embedded in the hilt)<sup>166</sup> and is viewed as an essential, inalienable part of the sword. The stone provides the only cure for a wound inflicted by its sword, and this cure is administered by rubbing the stone on the wound. This tradition extends in scope (possibly through influence from lapidary lore) in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Sigurðar saga þögla*, with *lyfsteinar* presented as drawing poison out of wounds, as well as healing *any* wounds, not just those inflicted by the associated sword. On the other hand, we have what we might call the *steinasörvi* tradition (seen in *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*). This involves a stone necklace that protects the wearer from physical harm, given to the wearer by an old woman associated with witchcraft. And finally, we have a more flexible tradition, which draws directly (and likely indirectly, via the continental romance tradition) on a wide range of properties of stones seen in lapidary lore. In *Íslendingasögur*, the focus is on stones with therapeutic functions, whereas in *fornaldarsögur* and especially *riddarasögur*, stones exhibit diverse magical properties that enhance bodily capabilities and that provide saga-authors

166 See *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, 169, which mentions “leystir lifsteinar” (loose/detachable healing-stones) kept on the sword hilt.

and compilers with a greater variety of narrative opportunities. This is not a rigid rule, since there is variation in depictions of properties within and across saga “sub-genres:” this flexibility of magical stones as a saga motif reflects the openness and “multimodality” of saga traditions.

As in lapidary texts, the curative and prophylactic properties of saga stones work through the stone’s proximity to humans, either worn on the body, or applied topically to ailments. And, as in the lapidary tradition, stones both heal and enhance the body. Where saga stones operate through physical proximity, a similar porousness of stone and body is implied, as it is in the lapidary tradition. However, in the case of *lyfsteinar*, we see a further level of contagion at work, between the sword and its curative stone. Through its proximity to the sword, the stone becomes contaminated with the sword’s nature. The *lyfsteinn* thus provides the only cure for wounds inflicted by the associated sword (as is stated explicitly in *Laxdæla saga*), operating through the principle of *similia similibus curantur*. This finding extends the relationship often seen between material artefacts and the personhood of its (human) owner, wherein the personhood of previous owners of an object contaminates the object and can be seen as an extension of the owner’s self: in the case of *lyfsteinar*, the nature or personhood of the sword contaminates the *lyfsteinn* attached to its hilt.

This case study, then, suggests a worldview in which the boundaries of humans and objects are open to negotiation. Networks of personhood and capability span both human and non-human matter: stones transfer their *náttúrur* to human users, just as swords transfer their *náttúrur* to *lyfsteinar*. What results is an understanding of human health and ability in flux and of the external material world as potentially vibrant or agentive, instrumental in maintaining a state of *heill* (health/wholeness).<sup>167</sup> This has implications not only for our understanding of medieval medical approaches to the mind–body complex but also for how we think about medieval Icelandic conceptions of personal and ontological identity, agency and attitudes towards the non-human world.

<sup>167</sup> On the physiological and social denotations of this term, see Cristopher Crocker and Yoav Tirosh, “Health, Healing and the Social Body in Medieval Iceland,” *Understanding Disability throughout History: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Iceland from Settlement to 1936*, ed. by Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and James G. Rice (New York: Routledge, 2021), 114.

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## SUMMARY

Lapidaries and *lyfsteinar*: Health, Enhancement and Human-Lithic Relations in Medieval Iceland

**Keywords:** AM 194 8vo, medicine, materiality, agency, human–non-human relations, lapidaries (texts), sagas

This article examines the properties of powerful stones in medieval Iceland, focusing on the applications of such stones in learned treatises and in saga literature. The relationships between humans and stones in these sources offer a useful case study for engaging with medieval Icelandic conceptions of the interplay between the human and the non-human world, specifically in terms of bodily health and enhancement. The article has two parts: the first part examines the Old Norse-Icelandic lapidary tradition as witnessed in the translated lapidary text in AM 194 8vo (ff. 45v–48v), providing an overview of the range of physiological, emotional and cognitive effects stones were thought to have on humans (from the curative and prophylactic to the enhancive); the second part discusses the appearance of stones in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saga literature, examining how their properties alter and develop over time and across genres. This research builds on the growing bodies of scholarship on dis/ability and medicine in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and finds that the presentation of powerful stones in these texts suggests an understanding of the human body and mind as fundamentally “open” to the vibrant, material world. It therefore further supplements contemporary research into conceptions of the self in medieval Iceland, as well as attitudes towards the non-human world.



## ÁGRIP

Náttúrusteinar og lyfsteinar: Heilsa, heilsubót og notkun fólks á steinum á Íslandi á miðöldum

**Efnisorð:** AM 194 8vo, lækningar, efnisfræði, heilsubót, samband manns og náttúru, náttúrusteinar, sögur

Þessi grein fjallar um náttúrusteina á íslenskum miðöldum eins og þeim er lýst í fornnorrænum fræðitextum og sagnaritum. Hugmyndir fólks á Íslandi á miðöldum um samband manns og náttúru eru greindar út frá þeim lýsingum á hlutverki steinanna sem birtast í ritunum og hugmyndum um líkamlega og andlega heilsu. Greinin er í tveimur hlutum. Fyrri hlutinn fjallar um þýddan norrænan miðaldatexta, svokallað „lapidary“, í handritinu AM 194 8vo (ff. 45v–48v). Textinn veitir innsýn inn í þau líffræðilegu, tilfinningalegu og hugrænu áhrif sem steinarnir voru taldir hafa á menn, í lækningaskyni, til að fyrirbyggja heilsuvandamál og til bæta frammistöðu. Í seinni hluti greinarinnar er fjallað um hlutverk og eðli steinanna eins og því er lýst í sagnaritum þrettándu og fjórtándu aldar, og hvernig lýsingar á eiginleikum þeirra breytast með tímanum. Í greininni er byggt á nýlegum rannsóknum á fötlun og læknisfræði í forníslenskum ritum. Meðal niðurstaða er að birtingarmyndir náttúrusteina í fornum textum endurspegli skilning fólks á mannlíkamanum og huganum sem „opnum“ fyrir efnisheiminum. Greinin er framlag til rannsókna á hugmyndum um sjálfið á Íslandi á miðöldum sem og á viðhorfum gagnvart hinum óefnislega heimi.

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