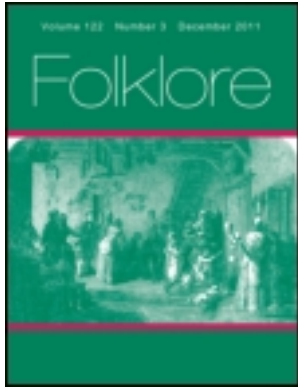


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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Stones and Spirits

Jane P. Davidson and Christopher John Duffin

*Abstract*

Stone-throwing by demons and witches and the mischievous activities of kobolds in mines are reviewed as part of an investigation into the darker folklore history of geology. Lithobolia has a pedigree extending from classical times, but sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century reports are particularly common. The existence of kobolds, who tormented miners by episodes of stone-throwing and mineral-switching, was accepted by clergy, laity and scientists alike. [1]

Fear is the path to the Dark Side (Yoda to Anakin Skywalker. *Star Wars: Episode 1 The Phantom Menace*. George Lucas, 1999).

## *Stones Thrown by Demons or Witches*

Contemporary modern accounts of the activities of “poltergeists” frequently contain examples of stones mysteriously thrown at paranormal investigators, ghost hunters or unsuspecting civilians. These stories are replete in tabloid television programmes such as *Most Haunted*, and radio programmes such as *Coast to Coast AM*. [2] Such accounts have a very long history stemming from the supposed activities of demons and witches, beginning with a small number of stories concerning the throwing of rocks by witches or demons that appear in the classic demonological literature. This is not a common aspect of the beliefs about devils and witches. It seems that these accounts might be very similar to what some persons today consider to be poltergeist activity. In current definition, poltergeists are malicious ghosts, sometimes thought to throw objects, including stones. In some cases it is thought that the “poltergeist” is in reality not a ghost or other disembodied entity, but the activity of a person’s mind instead.

The throwing of stones by witches or demons was theologically distinct from the casting of stones commonly mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, because demons or witches did not throw the stones in question. Biblical stoning was a form of punishment for sins or other wrong acts. The righteous punished the sinners. Stoning could result in the death of the transgressor. In the Bible, Numbers 15: 35–6 contains a passage in which God himself directed Moses to punish those who broke the Sabbath by stoning them: “And the Lord said unto Moses, The man [who had gathered sticks on the Sabbath] shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp.” John 8: 7 contains the famous remark of Jesus concerning the woman taken in adultery: “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.”

But a person might be stoned to death for holding controversial religious beliefs. Stoning of the early Christian martyr, St Stephen, is described in the Bible in Acts 7:

59–60. Stephen was of course executed by the Romans. In a sense the martyrdom of Stephen is similar to the stoning of other pious individuals by demons. Stoning was an act of torment inflicted on the godly that could lead to death.

During the classic period of witchcraft persecutions it was believed that witches might throw stones as an actual part of the ritual needed for casting an evil spell. Similarly, a demon might throw stones in order to harm or frighten people.

Martin Plantsch (c. 1460–1533) was a Professor of Theology at Tübingen University and a priest at Stiftskirche St Georg in the city. The burning of a witch at Tübingen in 1505 caused much local public concern. Plantsch responded by preaching a series of sermons, which were published in expanded form in 1507. His *Opusculum de Sagis Maleficis* [Treatise on Witchcraft] (1507) notes that witches cannot do evil on their own. [3] They must employ the help of a demon. And, of course, it was understood that the demons themselves had no powers apart from those allowed by God—a statement of nominalist theology. Lea noted that Plantsch commented that the devil can move rocks and mountains. This may be a reference to stone-throwing, or perhaps a large shower of stones from an avalanche (Lea 1939, vol. 1, 366).

The Protestant Leipzig lawyer, Benedict Carpzov (1595–1666) is considered to be the founder of jurisprudence in Germany. He noted in his major work on legal practice concerning witches, *Practica rerum criminalium* [In Regard to Criminal Matters], first published in 1635, that among the various things witches can do while engaged in evildoing is “they can throw stones” (Carpzov 1670, *Questio cxxxvii*, nos 55–7, 314–15; Lea 1939, vol. 2, 839).

Johann Godelmann (1559–1611), German Diplomat and Law Professor at Rostock University, made a similar comment. His *Tractatus de magis, veneficis et lamiis* ... [Treatise on Sorcerers, Witches and Demons ...] contains a passage in which he noted that it was permissible to ask an accused witch “whether it is not true that a year ago on Walpurgis evening the said N. stood before N’s door among his cattle and threw sand crosswise over them” (Godelmann 1591, vol. 3; Lea 1939, vol. 2, 781). The idea was, of course, that the witch had done this act in order to sicken or kill the cattle. Killing cattle was one of the more serious crimes that a witch might perpetrate. [4] The Latin title of this work, translated into German as *Von Zauberern Hexen und Unholden / Warhafftiger vnd Wolgegründter Bericht* ..., probably means “Concerning Female Sorcerers, Witches and Demons: A True and Wholly Substantiated Account.” This nicely illustrates the flexibility of various terms used to mean “witch” in Early Modern Europe. The word “*magis*” could also be translated as “sorcerer,” which is a witch, but usually referring to a male practitioner of magic. “*Veneficis*” meant a female witch, but “*lamiis*” can also be translated as a female witch. It is usually best to compare the Latin with a contemporary vernacular translation in order to see what the words meant. Thus, the German word “*Zauber*” is the same as the modern “*Zauberer*” and denoted a sorcerer, but it could also mean a male witch. A “*Zauberin*” was generally meant to denote a female witch. [5]

One noteworthy incidence of “lithobolia” or stone-throwing comes from a pamphlet printed in 1698 (Figure 1). *Lithobolia or the Stone-Throwing Devil* was probably written by Richard Chamberlain (1648–1706). Chamberlain, a royal secretary to New Hampshire, apparently witnessed several serious peltings that took place on the property of George Walton, where Chamberlain was lodging, during 1682. His account tells of large numbers of stones being mysteriously

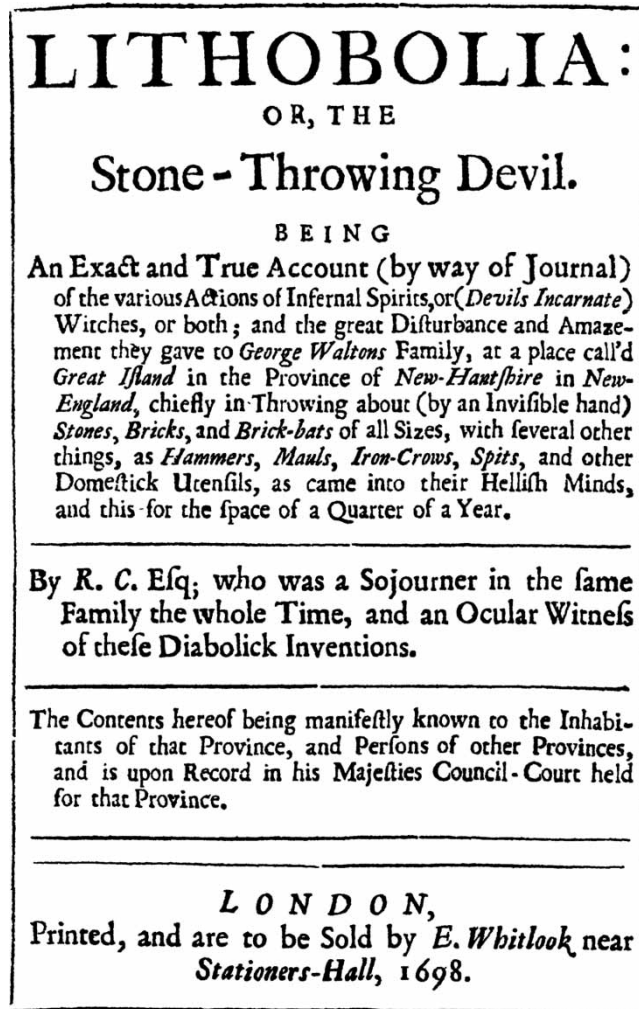


Figure 1. Title page of Richard Chamberlain's *Lithobolia* (1698). Reproduced with permission.

thrown on several occasions. A first reading of the pamphlet gives the impression that, at this late date in the seventeenth century, the work must be a satire. It was, however, meant to be taken seriously. [6]

Chamberlain's first-hand account contains several graphic descriptions of what supposedly happened. Stones fell inside the Walton home as well as on the grounds and nearby fields. The acts described by Chamberlain seem typical of what is sometimes termed poltergeist activities today:

On Tuesday Night (June 28) we were quiet; but not so on Wednesday, when the Stones were play'd about in the House . . . But my Landlord had the worst of that Day, tho' he kept the Field, being there invisibly hit above 40 times as he affirm'd to me . . . Upon Saturday, 9 July as I was going to visit my Neighbour Capt. Barefoot and just at his Door his Man saw, as well as my self, 3 [stones] fall just by us in the Field . . . After this we were pretty quiet, saying now and then a few Stones march'd about for Exercise and to keep as it were the Diabolical hand in use, till July 28, being Friday, when

about 40 Stones flew about, abroad, and in the House and Orchard, and among the Trees therein, and a Window broke before, was broke again . . . . (Chamberlain 1698, 12–14).

A recent study of the case places Chamberlain's story of lithobolia within a long context of incidents going back to ancient times in which supernatural entities throw stones (Baker 2007). Lithobolia of an apparent supernatural nature was discussed by the Roman historian, Livy (Titus Livius, 59 B.C.–A.D. 17). Livy recorded instances of flaming stones showering downward from the sky, frightening the Roman soldiers during the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage during the period 264–146 B.C.: "Men's fears were augmented by prodigies reported simultaneously from many places . . . that glowing stones had fallen from the sky at Praeneste . . ." (Livy 1628, Book XXII; Foster 1953, 201). [7] Indeed, there was even an ancient Roman festival of stone-throwing. [8]

Saint Daniel the Stylite (c. 409–93, originally from Syria) was one of a group of Christian ascetics who fasted, prayed and proclaimed the gospel message on tall pillars. Daniel apparently occupied his pillar in Thracia for a period of thirty-three years. The legend of his life tells of devils gathering beneath his perch and throwing stones at the Saint (Baker 2007, 16 and 210). Accounts from the early medieval Church feature some stories of saints who chose to spend time seated on tall stone pillars. These stories were more popular in the Eastern Church. As with any ascetic saint, men such as Saint Daniel were targets for demonic temptations and abuse. Daniel the Stylite is spoken of as "standing twixt earth and heaven." He resisted the Devil's temptations and thus provoked the stoning (Baynes 1948, *passim*). [9]

Cases of malicious devils who threw stones survive from medieval and also sixteenth-century Germany. There is a 1592 account from Oxfordshire; presumably such commonplace folklore accounts as that would have been familiar to Chamberlain (Baker 2007, 16; Gould and Cornell 1979, 27).

Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) recounted various tales of poltergeist activities that he cited as examples of folk superstitions. Among them was an account of a sailor, Jarvis Matcham, who was pelted with stones while walking along a road. The ghost seems to have been that of a youth he had murdered. Eventually Matcham succumbed to the pressure and confessed to his crime (Scott 1831, 357). While Scott wrote from the perspective of both a folklorist and a cynical critic, his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (n.d. [1834?]) helped to perpetuate stories of stone-throwing into the nineteenth century. [10]

### ***Kobolds***

Whereas tales of witches and demons are frequent in folklore, perhaps less well known are the activities of subterranean stone-throwers. Germanic folklore is replete with stories of kobolds. More commonly encountered in domestic and agricultural settings (Thorpe 1852, 155ff.), kobolds were also believed to occupy mountainous regions and mines in sixteenth-century Europe. This belief transcended differences in religions and disciplines; scientists, clergy and lay people alike believed in kobolds. The hapless Professor Schuppart of Giessen in Germany was apparently subjected to a six-year reign of terror at the hands of a kobold in his own home. He gives details of being pelted by stones, which "were sent whizzing through the room in all directions like Apollo's arrows" (Blackie 1834, 241). We use here Blackie's translation of Goethe's *Faust*.

Georgius Agricola (also known as Georg Bauer, 1494–1555) studied medicine at Leipzig University and went on to practice as both a physician and an apothecary at Sankt Joachimsthal—Jáchymov, in what is now the Czech Republic. The beginning of the sixteenth century found the town becoming an important spa, mining, and smelting centre, nestling against the aptly named Erzgebirge [“Ore Mountains”], which yielded large quantities of metallic minerals. Treating the miners and smelters for a range of occupational diseases, Agricola was a regular visitor at the mines where he took a keen interest in mining processes, metallurgy, and mineralogy. He gave the first systematic account of mineralogy and is celebrated as the “father” of that discipline in the earth sciences. Publishing a number of works in the 1540s, *De re metallica* [Concerning Metals] was his *magnum opus* (Agricola 1556; 2nd ed., 1561). Herbert Hoover commented in his 1912 English-language translation of the work that Agricola’s belief in kobolds was “... remarkable, in view of our author’s very general skepticism regarding the supernatural.” He noted: “The presence of demons or gnomes in the mines was so general a belief that Agricola fully accepted it” (Hoover and Hoover 1912, 217, note 26). [11] Elsewhere, Agricola describes the kobolds as being around two feet (sixty centimetres) tall, wearing a filleted garment with a leather apron, and playfully mimicking the miners themselves (Agricola 1549, 78; Hoover and Hoover 1912, 217). Although not generally malicious, they nevertheless “sometimes ... throw pebbles at the workmen, but they rarely injure them unless the workmen first ridicule or curse them” (Agricola 1549, 78; Hoover and Hoover 1912, 217). Kobolds might warn miners of impending trouble. At times they led miners to rich veins, but they also caused cave-ins and other subterranean disasters.

Another facet of mischievous activity attributed to them was the substitution of one ore for another. The identification of individual mineral species was only in its infancy during the sixteenth century, so when what seemed to be a promising silver ore was smelted, only to yield noxious fumes in place of the precious metal, it was deemed that the kobolds had exchanged one ore for another. The fumes, which injured the miners and killed livestock, probably emanated from associated arsenic compounds and bolstered the malicious reputations of the kobolds (Endlich 1888, 136). The mineral, cobalt, takes its name from kobold, and was eventually extracted from these ores (Jameson 1820, 279; Endlich 1888, 135–6). [12] The experience with “Kupfernichel” ore [“Old Nick’s Copper”] was less hazardous. Believed to contain copper, it yielded instead only a hard grey metal on being processed. The suffix indicated that this was a changeling mineral wrought by demonic substitution of one material for another. The grey component of the ore later gave its name to the new metallic element that was named from it—nickel (Endlich 1888, 135).

Kobolds were the folklore personifications of the transient fluctuations inherent in mining. They might act independently, but their actions could also be the result of compulsion by a witch or magus. Thus, while kobolds were found in scientific treatises, such as *De Re Metallica*, they were also discussed and depicted more widely in sixteenth-century witchcraft literature.

Agricola was not alone in his acceptance of the reality of kobolds. A number of contemporary clergy agreed. Martin Luther (1486–1546) commented on kobolds. His remarks were recorded in his *Table Talk* as:

The Devil and his works, DLXXIV. The devil vexes and harasses the workmen in the mines. He makes them think they have found fine new veins of silver, which, when they have labored and labored, turn out to be more illusions. Even in the open day, on the surface of the earth, he causes people to think they see a treasure before them, which vanishes when they would pick it up. [13]

Luther's contemporary, Olaus Magnus (1490–1557), Roman Catholic Archbishop of Uppsala, described sorcerers and witches who could compel the devil to provide favourable winds for sailors, make vehicles fly through the air, muck out stables and do the rough physical work of mining. His *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* [History of the Northern Peoples], published in 1555, contains an illustration showing all these activities (Figure 2). Like Agricola, Olaus Magnus was a highly respected scholar with an international reputation. He was a participant at the Council of Trent. *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* was printed in Rome during the time that Olaus Magnus was headquartered there.

*De spectris lemuribus . . . variisque praesagitionibus* [Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night . . . Various Suppositions] by the Zurich Calvinist minister Ludwig Lavater (1527–86) contains a lengthy account of the activities of kobolds (Lavater 1659). [14] Lavater described the activities of stone-throwing kobolds as reported by miners and other more benign kobolds mentioned in Agricola (Lavater 1659, Cap. XVI, 79ff):

Pioners or diggers for metal, do affirme, that in many mines, there appeare straunge shapes and spirities, who are appaeled like unto other laborers in the pit. These wander up and down in caves and underminings, & seeme to besturre them selves in all kind of labour, as to digges after ye veine, to carrie together oare, to put it into baskets and to turn the winding whele to drawe it up . . . They seldom hurte the laborers (as they say) except to provoke them by laughing and rayling at them: for they threw gravel stones at them, or hurt them by some other means . . . [Lavater goes on to cite Agricola] And againe he saith, there be some milde and gentle, whome some of the Germans call Cobali . . . (Wilson and Yardley 1929, 73–4).

It seems that the notions about kobolds were similar to those held about witches in the sixteenth century. There were substantially no differences in beliefs held by



Figure 2. Olaus Magnus (1555). Kobold mining while other devils assist witches in various ways. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 3. Title page of Fischer's *Das Buch vom Aberglauben* (1790), which contains a discussion of the kobold. Reproduced with permission.

Catholics or Protestants. Witches were considered “real” and evidently so were kobolds. Godelmann even discussed kobolds (Godelmann 1591, II, cap 1, nn. 1–12; Lea 1939, II, 769). [15]

Petrus (Pedro de) Valderrama (d. 1611) published *Histoire Generale du Monde et de la Nature* [General History of the World and of Nature], between 1617 and 1619, with Volume I of the two volumes appearing last (Valderrama 1917–19). Lea believed that this work was originally written in Spanish between 1605 and 1610, but that the French translation was the only published version (Lea 1939, vol. 2, 471 and 474). According to Lea's transcriptions and notes, Kobolds are discussed



by Valderrama in the *Histoire Generale du Monde et de la Nature* (Chapter II, 161–74 *passim*):

The subterranean spirits are those who dwell in caverns and other recesses of the earth, where they kill or suffocate or render insane miners in search of precious metals. The Germans call them Kobolds. They are gnomes, dwarfs not over an ell in height, and they help in cutting stones, getting out metals, packing them in baskets and hauling to the surface. They laugh and whistle and perform a thousand tricks, but their services often redound to the injury and death of those whom they serve. They cut the ropes, break the ladders, cause the fall of rocks, send poisonous vapor; and you will see rich mines abandoned for the fear of them . . . It is they who cause earthquakes . . . They are not only the guardians of the mines, but of hidden treasures, which they allow no one to take . . . (Lea 1939, vol. 2, 474–5). [16]

Almost two hundred years after Valderrama, Heinrich Ludwig Fischer's *Das Buch vom Aberglauben* [The Book of Superstitions] contains a section on kobolds among his discussion of folk beliefs in various supernatural entities. This is an interesting late example that shows the resilience of the belief, although it may be assumed that Fischer did not hold these superstitions himself. The frontispiece depicts a variety of other occult activities (Figure 3). A magus is shown working what is probably a conjuring a spell while standing inside a magic circle. He recites from his book of spells and rituals. He has cast the circle for his protection from the devil which has appeared in the form of a goat.

### Conclusions

It is clear that the supernatural launching of stones, whether intended to injure or merely terrify people, is a commonplace in the lore of witchcraft and demonology. At times this is a malicious act brought about by a witch directing a devil to throw stones. Some witches themselves also threw rocks, but for the most part the acts were accomplished by non-human entities. These stories coincide with the accounts of miners who describe kobolds, subterranean devils who pestered and sometimes injured those working underground. Herein the malice was not directed by humans, but seems to have come directly from the devils themselves. Lithobolia was never entirely benign.

### Notes

- [1] This paper is one of a series dealing with the general topic of "geology and the dark side." The papers investigate, for the first time, the connection between geology and the occult. Each of the papers is distinct in contents. Main threads include folklore association between fossils, rocks and minerals and various supernatural entities as expressed in colloquial nomenclature of geological specimens (Duffin and Davidson 2011), geological materials used by supernatural entities such as the devils or witches, divination using geological materials, and the use of geological materials as protective agents against witchcraft (Duffin, 2011).
- [2] The British television programme *Most Haunted* features the activities of a team of paranormal investigators who are, in almost every episode, routinely pelted with thrown stones, bits of broken glass, and other such objects, which, it is suggested, are projected towards them by ghosts or evil entities. The investigators make provocative comments such as "If you are here with us, give us a sign, make a sound, throw something." Comments like that frequently seem to produce a stone-throwing event. The US radio programme, *Coast to Coast AM*, Art Bell,

*Somewhere in Time*, on 9 May 2009, contained a replay of a programme originally broadcast on 18 December 2002, during which a caller reported to host, Art Bell, that he had frequently been pelted by stones thrown at him by an unseen evil entity. Bell commented to the caller that this was a pretty routine thing to have happen in such a paranormal incident.

- [3] Digital version available from [http://www.digital-collections.de/index.html?c=autoren\\_index&l=en&ab=Plantsch%2C+Martin](http://www.digital-collections.de/index.html?c=autoren_index&l=en&ab=Plantsch%2C+Martin); INTERNET [accessed 1 January 2010].
- [4] Godelmann (1591, Book III) contained his list of permissible questions for witchcraft trials. Godelmann's book was very influential and was republished several times following the first edition. Editions of 1592, in German, and 1601, in Latin, are also known (see Godelmann 1592).
- [5] For the purposes of this essay, the term "*magus*" denotes a magician. One might be a magician and also a witch. A sorcerer similarly was a magician, but could also be a witch. Magic is defined here as acts that compelled a supernatural being, angel or devil, to appear and do the bidding of the magician. Magic was not necessarily an evil act in Early Modern Europe. But it was a supernatural act.
- [6] The pamphlet is readily available from several online sources. Two copies of the original are in the British Museum. The American historian George Lincoln Burr transcribed the pamphlet and gave brief comments on it in his *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, New York, published by Charles Scribner's Sons (see Burr 1914, 55–77). Baker (2007) goes into detail about the case and possible explanations of the poltergeist activities.
- [7] Bibliographical notes contain a list of various early printed and manuscript sources for Livy's *Historicorum Romanorum. Titi Livii Patauini historicorum Romanorum principis, Libri omnes superstites 1628* [A History of Rome. All Surviving Books 1628]. There are several sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century printed editions of Livy's *History of Rome*.
- [8] See Baker (2007, 15 and 210) for the accounts of Pausanias and Livy.
- [9] For the account of Saint Daniel the Stylite excerpted from Baynes (1948), see also <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/dan-stylite.html>; INTERNET [accessed 10 June 2010].
- [10] We use here an undated specialty-bound copy from about 1834, published in London by William Tegg. Letter Ten contains several accounts of thrown projectiles. See Scott (n.d. [1834?], 364–6) for the story of Jarvis Matcham.
- [11] Here we use the 1912 Hoover and Hoover volume. There is also a facsimile reprint of the 1912 book, published by Dover Publications, New York, 1950. We also used the second Latin edition of *De re metallica*. Basileae: H. Frobenium and N. Episcopium, 1561. The first edition was also printed by Froben in Basel in 1556.
- [12] "Miners have been in all ages remarkable for their superstitious notions. The miners of Germany were said to be haunted by evil spirits, termed Kobolden by the miners; and those minerals having the appearance of rich ores, but which afforded nothing valuable, were considered the work of those evil spirits, and were named Kobold" (Jameson 1820, 279).
- [13] "Table Talk" from *The Works of Martin Luther* (Martin 2009, lines 11405–11).
- [14] According to H. C. Lea, the book was originally published in German in 1569 in Zurich (Lavater 1569 [translated into English by Harrison 1572]; see also Wilson and Yardley 1929). The earliest Latin edition seems to date from 1571 although many later editions were produced in various languages including Latin, French and English. The book remained popular well into the seventeenth century. For comments on Lavater and his beliefs in kobolds, see Lea (1939, vol. 2, 550), who used the 1659 Amsterdam edition of Lavater's work.
- [15] This book also went through several editions into the seventeenth century, thus continuing the prevalence of the beliefs in kobolds.
- [16] Lea noted that Valderrama was very credulous. Lea paraphrased Valderrama and did not provide direct quotes for the Valderrama material on kobolds. See Lea (1939, vol. 2, 550).

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### **Biographical Notes**

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