



Medical and Magical Treasures in Anglo-Saxon Herbals

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There is great power and appeal for the serious magical practitioner in seeking wisdom from ancient sources rather than relying solely on modern, potentially derivative works. For those with an interest in the fragrant, green path of herbal medicine and magic, the writings of our Anglo-Saxon ancestors provide a wealth of useful knowledge, rooted firmly, not only in our land, but also in the more ancient Classical and European herbal traditions.

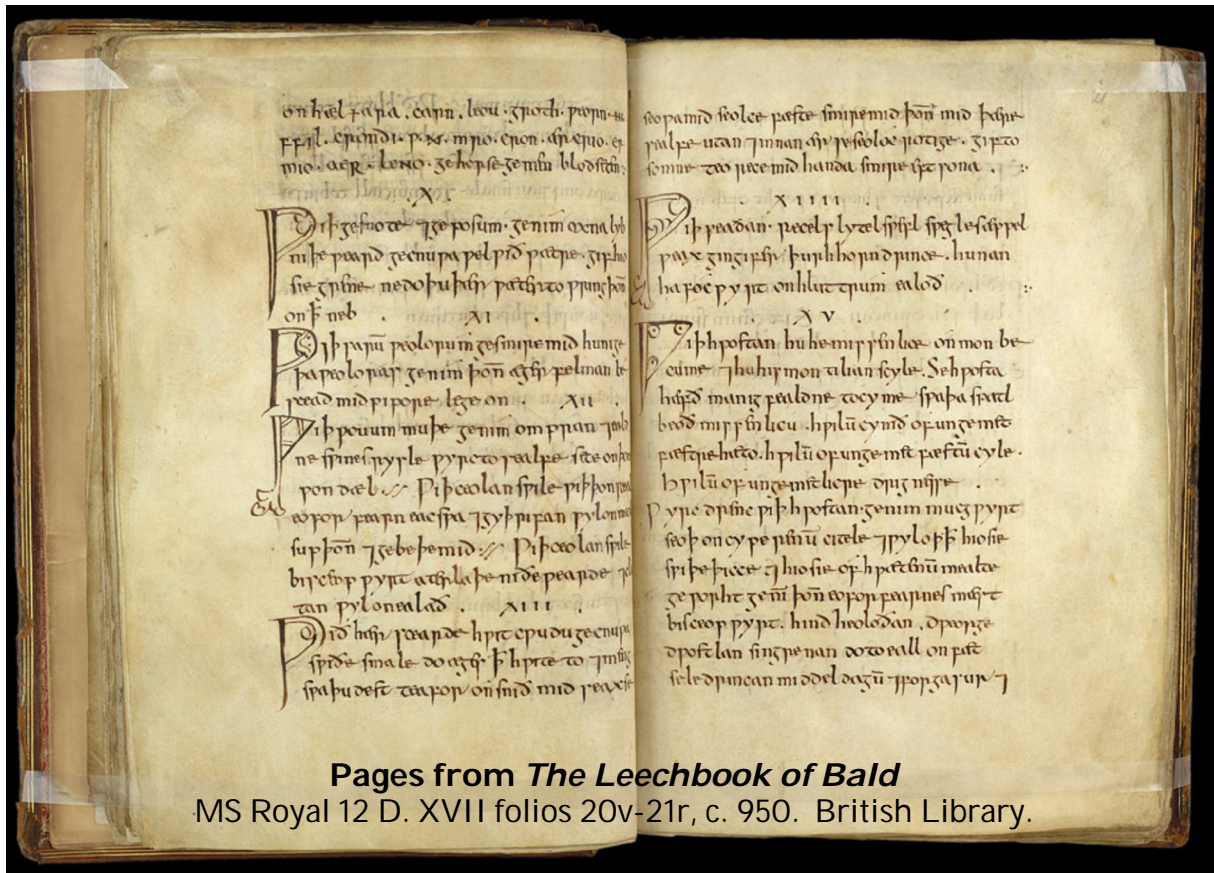
There are three major surviving medical texts compiled by the Anglo-Saxons in Old English (O.E.), found in manuscript sources. Now known as *The Leechbook of Bald*, *The Lacnunga* and *The Old English Herbarium*. They were collected by Oswald Cockayne in *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft in Early England*, published in three volumes between 1864 and 1866. This work is comprised of over 1,000 pages of parallel text. The O.E. is reproduced in the script known as Insular Hand, in which most A.S. records were written, accurately and meticulously transcribed from the original manuscripts by Cockayne himself (Singer, 1961).

Leechbook

The oldest major text in the collection is the manuscript, written about 950 CE, containing the three recipe collections known as *The Leechbook of Bald*. It is probably a copy of a lost manuscript written in Winchester about fifty years earlier, during the reign of Alfred the Great (Cameron, 1993).

The *Leechbook* is thought to be a manual for doctors' use (Payne, 1904) and has generally been considered to be "the most comprehensive and best organised of all

medical compilations" (Meaney, 1984). It arranges disease manifestations in a head-to-toe pattern, combining Mediterranean sources with native materials (Cameron, 1993). The first book contains 88 sections of single or multiple, related recipes, the second book 67, and the third book, in which native elements predominate, contains 73 sections. Each book has a list of contents, giving the purpose of the recipe/s.



Pages from *The Leechbook of Bald*
MS Royal 12 D. XVII folios 20v-21r, c. 950. British Library.

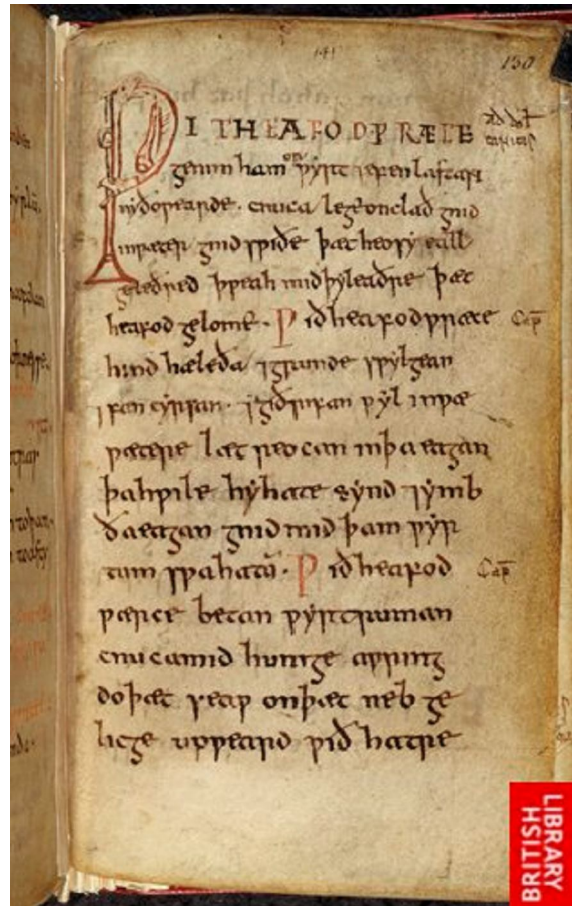
Lacnunga

The Lacnunga (meaning remedies, the name given to the collection by Cockayne) is somewhat later than the *Leechbooks* and is a collection of 1100 herbal remedies, prayers, blessings and charms for humans and livestock, mostly in O.E. and Latin. The main section of the manuscript dates from the late tenth to the mid eleventh century. Pettit (2001) suggests that whoever used the recipes must have been wealthy, as some of the ingredients are exotic and therefore expensive, Christian, but probably not a model of orthodoxy (some of the remedies require the use of a paten outside a church), literate in Old English and Latin, and concerned with the welfare of humans and livestock. It appears to be a haphazard collection rather than a unified medical text.

Right: The First Page of the *Lacnunga*
MS Harley 585, folio 130.
British Library.

Old English Herbarium

The *Old English Herbarium*, the only A.S. medical work to survive in more than a single copy, is a translation into Old English of the Latin compendium of texts known as the *Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius* and is derived from Greco-Roman sources. The Latin original appears to have been in circulation in England by the ninth century (Pollington, 2000). It contains 185 sections, each devoted to a particular herb, providing alternative names and one or more uses of the plant.



In addition to these major works, various charms, smaller fragments and other medical recipes also exist, sometimes as marginal additions to non-medical manuscripts.

Medically, there is much of the value in the recipes. Indeed many of the herbs are used in much the same ways as modern medical herbalists would prescribe them. Cough remedies using such herbs as White Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) and Elecampane (*Inula helenium*), headache cures using Betony (*Stachys betonica*), pain relief using Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) and bitter herbs recommended for improving the appetite and digestion are all used now, much as they were over a millennium ago. The use of Ivy (*Hedera helix*) boiled in butter for sunburn, is less familiar but comprehensible in view of the anti-inflammatory properties of the plant and the addition of pepper (*Piper nigrum*) to many of the remedies is clearly an effective way of improving their absorption.



Marrubium vulgare, from
Köhler's Medicinal Plants, 1887.

Magical knowledge is interwoven into some of the suggested treatments, and it is this that gave the texts a dubious reputation with early commentators and led to their dismissal by an early editor as “a final pathological disintegration of the great system of Greek medical thought” (Singer, 1917). Much of the magic is Christian-based, involving invocations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, elaborate prayers, often repeated three or nine times, words being written on the paten, herbs being placed under the altar and masses said over them, and the use of the names of saints.

One particular “holy salve” from the *Lacnunga*, requires a long list of herbs, including Betony, Agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*), Rue (*Ruta graveolens*), Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*) and many more. The butter used must be from a cow of a single colour and, with the herbs, it is placed in holy water from the consecration of a font. The butter is then stirred with a stick on which have been carved the names of the four Apostles. The Creed and various litanies are to be said over it along with an incantation, which is to be sung:

Acre arcra arnem nona ærnem beoðor ærnem, nidren arcum cunað ele harassan fidine

The formula resembles others of Anglo-Saxon origin but may have an Irish derivation. Scholars have, however, had little success in making sense of it and, I must confess, I have not tried it out myself, although the carving of names of deities onto sticks used for stirring specific potions has proven effective. It is often the case that, even if the charm is not practical in its entirety, useful aspects can be adapted and incorporated into modern practice.

Sometimes a simple amulet is used, such as Plantain (*Plantago major*) tied around the neck for a sore throat, or a spindle whorl for a pain in the jaw. Both of these examples are from *Leechbook III*.

There are examples of written charms being attached to the patient. In one *Lacnunga* remedy for *dweorh*, meaning a dwarf, but also suggesting a fever, possibly with seizures, seven communion wafers have written upon them the names Maximianus, Malchus, Johannes, Martiniaus, Dionisius, Constantinus and Serafion. A charm is said into the patient’s right ear, left ear, over the top of the head, after which a virgin hangs the wafers around the person’s neck. This is repeated over a period of three days.

Elves have been seen as being blamed by the Anglo-Saxons for an illness of sudden onset. In both animals and humans this is often in the form of elfshot (*ylfa gescot*), as is the case in the well known charm, from the *Lacnunga*, “*Wið Færstice*”, often translated as “For a Sudden Stitch.” Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*), Plantain and what appears to be Red Dead Nettle (*Lamium purpureum*) are applied, boiled in butter and a lengthy charm recited, including an appeal to the “little spear” to come out if it is in there. “*Ut lytel spere gif her inne sie*”. This is said to be a cure for elfshot, witches’ shot and gods’ (Aesir) shot. However, as Alaric Hall (2007) has pointed out, the fact that a painful condition is called elfshot does not necessarily mean people believed the problem was literally caused by elves. After all, we set great magical store by the belemnites we find along the coast and refer to them as elf bolts, although we are also fully aware that they are fossils.

The Nine Herbs Charm

The most obviously Pagan/magical inclusion is in the *Lacnunga*. It is the entry known as *The Nine Herbs Charm*, which refers to Woden, in the only named reference to any pre-Christian deity in the herbal texts. The charm is complex and confusing, perhaps deliberately tantalising and riddling, so that only the cunning are able to unpick it, although not helped by the corrupt nature of the manuscript text at this point (Cameron, 1993). Not all the herb names can be confidently translated, although Cameron asserts that they are Mugwort (*Artemesia vulgaris*), Plantain (*Plantago major*), Lamb's Cress (*Cardamine hirsute*), Attorlothe (*Fumaria/Corydalis*), Chamomile (*Anthemis nobilis* or *Matricaria recutita*), Nettle (*Urtica spp*), Crab Apple (*Malus sylvestris*), Chervil (*Chaerophyllum temulum*, *C. aureum* or *Myrrhis odorata*), and Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*).

One particularly appealing aspect of the charm, with useful magical applications, is the way in which the herbs are addressed directly, stating their attributes and powers, much in the manner of an invocation.

The charm begins by addressing Mugwort as “the oldest of plants:

*Gemyn ðu mucgwyrht hwaet ðu
renadest æt regenmelde* (Remember,
Mugwort, what you declared through
your great revelation)

The nature of the revelation is unclear (or perhaps it is something the writer assumes that everyone knows), although the charm tells us that Mugwort has power against poison, infection and “the evil that travels the land”. (The Anglo-Saxon is *ða laðan*, which suggests a hostile or hateful thing). This is a large magical claim, but observing this robust yet exquisitely beautiful plant, in modern times, gracing the sides and central reservations of motorways, appearing in meadows and upon wasteland all around the country, one begins to see what the creator of this charm meant. Perhaps it is also a reference to the numerous other virtues of the plant, not mentioned here but which can be gleaned from a variety of sources.



Artemesia vulgaris, from
Köhler's Medicinal Plants, 1887.

We know that a bunch of Mugwort hung up in a home can make a significant difference to the atmosphere and keep out much that is not wanted, and to take a piece of the plant on a journey, as suggested in the *Old English Herbarium*, can prove most helpful. Of course, many people know the old trick of placing a Mugwort leaf in

each shoe to prevent the feet from getting tired, an idea that I have adapted for my own "Three Mothers Foot Powder", which includes Mugwort, Mint and Myrrh.

Mugwort also makes an excellent pre-ritual tea and is helpful in scrying or other divination work. It stops beer going sour and can help deter clothes moth larvae. It can be smoked too and indeed, one of its common names is Sailor's Tobacco.

Its botanical name, *Artemisia*, a reference to the goddess Artemis, indicates that it has a medical action on the womb and menstrual cycle. The herb is also rather bitter so, as the *Old English Herbarium* suggests, it makes an excellent digestive tonic.

Like Mugwort, the second herb, *wegbrade*, meaning Waybread, which is Greater Plantain, is able to resist poison, infection and the evil that travels the land. This herb is addressed as the "Mother of Plants" and "mighty within", suggesting considerable resilience, as well, especially as brides cry over it, bulls snort over it and carts run over it. Thinking of how often one sees Greater Plantain growing on paths where it is constantly crushed underfoot, it certainly seems to be a very useful herb for the downtrodden of this world. There are plenty of people (often mothers) whose ills stem from them being taken for granted and put upon by others, and this herb can work wonders as a medical or magical application. Medically, as a tea or tincture, it has benefits for the mucous membranes, digestion, kidneys, the blood, skin and bladder. It is an anti-histamine and anti-bacterial and an excellent wound herb to stem the flow of blood, so rather fulfils all that the charm claims of it. It is interesting to note that modern medical herbalists tend to prefer Ribwort Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), which is chemically almost identical to Greater Plantain. It is probably preferred because its spear-shaped leaves stand tall above the ground, do not become as crushed and gritty as those of its close cousin, and are much easier to harvest and process. For many modern herbalists, chemistry and the pharmacologically provable are the only considerations, but for certain people, the constantly squashed Greater Plantain may be more suitable. However, a cut or bite on a finger when out walking is often better treated with Ribwort, which conveniently presents its strap-like leaves in bandage form, which can be applied directly, and are easy to tie firmly, with rapid beneficial effect.

The attribution "open to the East" may have significant magical application. The Plantain takes the power of the morning sun, the new arrival of the Light, with all the hope and promise of that direction, which is sacred in both Christian and Pagan traditions. Perhaps the plant's strength waxes as the sun rises, as did that of the Arthurian hero, Gawain. In fact, this is the case with many herbs. Pettit (2001) points out that in Sanskrit Atharva-Veda charms, the rising sun can destroy worms. Bonser (1963) takes the more prosaic view that the plant should be free of dew, which is perfectly sensible from a herbalist's perspective. Whatever the significance of this phrase, which could encompass any or all of the interpretations given, it is one of many curious "pointers", which provide a little information but either assume previous knowledge of what is being referred to or require much magical digging for exact meaning.

Another such fascinating reference occurs in the section on "*mægðe*", which could refer to chamomile. The herb is asked to be mindful of what was made known and finished at "*alorforda*", that no one should lose their life to disease if they use this plant as their food. Chamomile (especially *Matricaria recutita*) is known know as

"The Mother of the Gut" and is an extremely useful and effective herb, but there seems to be more behind this mysterious line of the charm. Where, after all is "*alorforda*" (alder ford). The Alder is a tree of bridges, both literal and magical and fords are liminal spots where magical revelations might not be unexpected. Assuming this is a real-world, rather than a mythical place, there are two possible locations suggested by Pettit. One is Allerford, near Minehead, in Somerset, and the other is Alderford, in Norfolk. Alders thrive near water and are common trees at fords so this could really be any number of places. However, I personally favour the Norfolk location, having worked there magically on a number of occasions and found it to be an immensely powerful spot, intensely magical, the domain of many of the Fair Folk, although not always wholeheartedly welcoming to humans.

The much discussed but no less mysterious reference to Woden in the charm, states that he used nine "*wuldortanas*", often translated as "glory twigs" or "glorious rods" (although perhaps "wands" might be better), to strike an adder into nine pieces to end its poison. Colours are then attributed to nine poisons which the nine herbs can counter.

In the true spirit of dual observance, Christ is also mentioned in a request that all "*weoda*" (weeds or useless plants) should become "*wyrtum*" (useful herbs).

This fascinating charm ends with a complex salve recipe in which all the nine herbs are powdered, mixed with old soap, made into a paste with water and ashes, and mixed with boiled fennel. It is however, important to sing the charm three times not only on each of the herbs before they are used, but also on the patient's mouth, both ears and the wound, prior to applying the salve.

The Nine Herbs Charm is one of many Anglo-Saxon herbal writings which still have wisdom to offer. Indeed, their value was recognised by many generations who followed the Anglo-Saxon period and the Anglo-Saxon herbals continued to be used for centuries. The last known copy of the *OE Herbarium* was not made until the 12th century and annotations continued to be made in OE, Latin and Norman French right up until the 17th century, when Elysabet Colmore signed her name on the cover page of the Cotton Vitellius iii *OE Herbarium* (D'Aronco, 2008).

The Anglo-Saxon herbal texts clearly have a lot to offer the medical herbalist (Thomas, 2011). This, and their more general medical relevance, is being increasingly recognised through a variety of academic research projects. From a more esoteric point of view, these texts are a treasure house of magical gems too, and certainly reward the effort spent unravelling their meaning and working out their practical application.

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Note

This article was accepted for publication in *The Cauldron* just before the editor of that journal, Michael Howard, sadly passed away. He leaves a wonderful legacy in the form of his published and edited works, and will be much missed.