Anglo Saxon Leechcraft
By
Stephanie Paull of
Saebert’s Folc

‘England was unique in producing a medical literature in a non-Latin tongue’

The Texts

We are very fortunate in there being several Old English medical texts still surviving. Most of these texts were collected and published by Oswald Cockayne in *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England*, published in three volumes between 1864 and 1866, and have been the focus of much study and analysis by historians ever since.

**Bald's Leechbook (London, BL, Royal12.D.xvii)**

This manuscript dates from about 950AD and consists of three books known as Bald’s Leechbook I, II and III which have been copied by the same scribe as one work.

**Bald’s Leechbook I and II**

Bald’s Leechbook I and II is a collection of remedies organised by ailment. The books are a collation of both Mediterranean and English medical lore which Cameron describes as ‘a sophisticated effort to incorporate the best of known medical practices’. The first book deals mostly with external ailments, whilst the second mostly with internal ailments, an arrangement that is possibly unique. This division is not strict, partly because both books experienced revision between the original compilation (some 50 years earlier) and the copying of this manuscript. Unfortunately the latter part of chapter 56 of Book II through to the first part of chapter 64 is missing, including the chapter on gynaecological matters. The organisation of these texts suggest that their compilation would have required significant organisation and it is likely that the remedies were collected and stored, perhaps on scraps of parchment, before being ordered and copied.

Audrey Meaney has suggested that the original compilation was produced during King Alfred’s reign (871-901AD) and the writing style indicates that there were at least two compilers of the original manuscript. The books were copied by one scribe and three different hands have been detected in the margin notes. N R Kerr described the script as ‘a decorative and practiced Anglo Saxon minuscule identical with that of the annals for 925-55 in the Parker Chronicle, and that both the Parker Chronicle and this manuscript were written at Winchester’.

Evidence suggests that the two volumes were separated and underwent different processes of transmission and revision before coming together for the extant copy to have been made.

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1 Porter, 1999, p.91
2 Cameron, 1993, p.35
3 Nokes, 2004, p.35
4 Ibid., p.52
5 Ibid., p.70
The Latin colophon names of the owner of the book as Bald and the scribe of the manuscript as Cild. Its placement in the extant copy, between the end of Bald II and the beginning of Bald III (described below), forms part of the evidence that Bald III was originally a separate work. The colophon reads as follows:

Bald habet hunc librum cild quem conscribere iussit;
Hic precor assidue cunctis in nomine Xristi.
Quo nullus tollat hunc librum perfidus a me.
Nec ui nec furto nec quodam famine falsa.
Cur quia nualla mihi tam cara est optima gaza.
Quam cari libri quos Xristi gratia comit.

Bald is the owner of this book which he ordered Cild to write;
Earnestly here I beg everyone in the name of Christ
That no deceitful person shall take this book from me
Neither by force or by stealth nor by any false statement.
Why? Because no richest treasure is so dear to me
As my dear books which the grace of Christ attends.

As yet I have been unable to locate a translation of Bald I and II for personal study. This was published in Oswald Cockayne’s Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England of 1864-6 and also in Bald’s Leechbook, edited by C E Wright and published in 1955 but both publications have proved difficult to obtain. Extracts in Old English can be found in the appendices of M L Cameron’s Anglo Saxon Medicine.

Bald III

The third part of London, BL, Royal12.D.xvii is known as Bald III and as such is also believed to date from 950AD and written in a scriptorium at Winchester as a copy of an earlier work. M L Cameron states this ‘reflects most closely the medical practice of the Anglo Saxons while they were still relatively free of Mediterranean influences’ and that it ‘is the only representative of the corpus of ancient northern medicine surviving from the Anglo Saxon period’. The proportion of native ingredients with Old English rather than anglicized Latin names is high whilst less than a third of the remedies can be traced to a Latin source. Compared with Bald I and II, this text has a high proportion of magical remedies, although most remain rational. The text is almost complete, and follows the traditional head to foot order (head – shoulders – arms – internal organs – genitals – hips – legs - feet) up to chapter 24, whereafter the traditional order is frequently interrupted, possibly reflecting the order in which remedies were collected. A translation can be found in Stephen Pollington’s Leechcraft: Early English Charms, Plantlore and Healing.

Lacnunga (BL,Harley 585)

This text was given its name by Oswald Cockayne (Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England, 1864-6) and means ‘remedies’. It has been dated to circa 1000AD. It begins by following the traditional head to foot order but very quickly follows no apparent order and appears to have been a commonplace book, a private collection of remedies compiled as they came to hand. The remedies are listed by ailment and it was compiled by at least two individuals. The text

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6 Cameron, 1993, p.35  
7 Ibid., p.65  
8 Pollington, 2008, p.72
contains many errors for which, as Cameron points out, we should be thankful as the compilers included charms of pagan, Teutonic and Irish origin as well as Christian, remarkable considering it is a late Anglo Saxon text written when the population was predominantly Christian. A translation can be found in Stephen Pollington’s *Leechcraft: Early English Charms, Plantlore and Healing*.

**The Omont Fragment (Fragmenta H. Omont No.3)**

This is a single leaf and has been dated to c850 AD. This work was found among the papers of M. Henri Omont of the Bibliothèque National de Paris on his death in 1940. Its history is unknown but it is ‘among the earliest known sections of connected Old English prose … (and) at least a century older than any other medical text’[^9]. A translation can be found in Stephen Pollington’s *Leechcraft: Early English Charms, Plantlore and Healing*.

**Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius**

This is a collection of several Latin works, the main body of which was falsely attributed to Apuleius. The additional works consist of a treatise on betony by Antonius Musa, some pseudo-Dioscoridean *Ex herbis femininis* recipes, and Sextus Placitus’ *De taxone* and *Medicina de quadrupedibus* dealing with remedies from animals[^10]. The herbal material is arranged so that each plant has its own chapter, dealing with its medicinal uses and giving its Greek, Latin and Old English name. The text has therefore proved useful in identifying plants in other Old English medical texts. The text was known in England by at least the ninth century and the BL, Harley 585 manuscript also contains the Lacnunga. Four copies of Old English translations survive, attesting to its popularity and it is the only Old English medical work to survive in multiple copies. Only one is illustrated, being BL, Cotton Vitellius, produced at Canterbury in the early 11th century, whilst the copy in the Bodleian Library (Hatton 76, 13th century) has spaces for illustrations but these were never utilised. The other copies are the BL, Harley 6258B (circa 1200AD) and the oldest copy, BL Harley 585 (circa 1000AD). The illustrations are believed to be of the plants in their dried state, perhaps representing what they would look like after storage, purchase or importation[^11]. The translator of the Cotton manuscript was not entirely successful and of the 185 plants listed in the Herbarium the

[^9]: Pollington, 2008, p.75
[^10]: Voigts, 1979, p.251
[^11]: Ibid., p.252
translator did not translate 41\textsuperscript{12}. However, the translations were not mindless copies and Voigts notes that lists of synonyms to plant names were added to each chapter, along with information concerning habitat, this information being placed at the front of each chapter rather than at the end as in the original\textsuperscript{13}. Information apparently considered irrelevant was omitted and a practical table of contents added.

\textbf{Enchiridion}

This was written by the monk Bryhtferth of Ramsey in Old English and Latin circa 1011AD. Only a few pages survive and they use material written by Bede, including his diagram on the macrocosm. This diagram clearly shows the four elements, the four seasons and the corresponding four ages of man, surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac. It is interesting that, whilst such teachings were known, they had limited impact on Anglo Saxon medicine (see ‘Classical Source’ below).

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{enchiridion.png}
\caption{Diagram from the Enchiridion}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{12} Cameron, 1993, p.63
\textsuperscript{13} Voigts, 1979, p.255
Western MS.46

This single leaf is housed at the Wellcome Museum. Little research has been completed on this document to date, which has been dated to the 11th century and contains one remedy each for heartache, lung disease, liver disease and two for wens (tumours or localized swellings). It was written by three different hands (clearly shown in the manuscript) and was originally the blank end leaf of an unidentified manuscript. The following translation is taken from the Wellcome Museum website:

For heartache, take broad-bishopwort, field-bishopwort, great-wort, comfrey, sweet-gale, hindheal, organe, stichwort, horehound, sage, alehoof, agrimony, cinquefoil, black hellebore, gentian, mugwort, southernwood; pound all together; make an ale. Drink of it when you have need.

For lung disease, henbane, mulberry, horehound, betony; boil into an ale and (let the patient) drink at times as he has need. Let him take afterwards an egg-shell full of melted butter; then cover him up arm, and let him then rest.

To make yourself an ointment for tumours, one shall take pure honey, such as is used to lighten porridge, boil it to almost the thickness of porridge; take radish, elder, wild thyme, cinquefoil, pound them as well as you can; and when it is almost done mix in a good measure of garlic and put to it as much pepper as you think.

A salve against tumours, water cucumber, a handful of spearmint, dittany, woodwax, mulberry; boil in malt-ale; squeeze through a linen cloth, boil in honey-droppings; take then clean spring barley, grind (it) in a handmill; then take madder, dry it in (an oven); grind a handful of red-cabbage seed in a peppermill; boil all together, not too hard. Use it three times a week, as is most convenient. This salve is good for tumours and for the bleeding of piles. But it should be stirred up, lest it should be spoiled.

For liver disease, take liverwort; let it be carried home under your knee; boil it in milk from a cow of one colour and mix butter with it.
Materia Medica

The material medica of the Old English medical texts constitutes a staggering number of different plant and animal products. Plants make up the largest proportion of ingredients, well over 90%, making Anglo Saxon medicine overwhelmingly herbal\(^\text{14}\). Cameron has analysed Bald I and Leechbook III to establish the most commonly used ingredients (many ingredients were only mentioned once or twice). The following table uses this list along with those most commonly used in the Lacnunga to show that the majority of the most common ingredients would have been available in Anglo Saxon England without the need for importation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plant or Material</th>
<th>Number of appearances in Bald I and III</th>
<th>Number of appearances in Lacnunga</th>
<th>Number of appearances in the Herbarium</th>
<th>Native or likely to have been grown or produced.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ale</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorlothe (corydalis/fumitory)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barley Hordeum vulgare</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beet Beta vulgaris</td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betony Stachys officinalis</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishopsworth (it is likely that several plants bore this name)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butter</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlina Thistle Carlina vulgaris</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celandine Chelidonium majus</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centaury Erythraea centaurium</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cockle Melandrium album</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coriander Coriandrum sativum</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^\text{14}\) Cameron, 1993, p.101
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Lactation</th>
<th>Lactation?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Dung</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eggs</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elecampane Inula helenium</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fats</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fennel Foeniculum vulgare</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feverfew Tanacetum parthenium</td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gall</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groundsel Senecio vulgaris</td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindhealth Agrimonia eupatoria or Teucrium scorodonia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horehound (marrubium vulgare or ballota nigra)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy Hedera helix</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lupin Lupinus</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oak Quercus robur</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onions/Garlic Allium cepa Allium sativum</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennyroyal Mentha pulegium</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant</td>
<td>Quantity 1</td>
<td>Quantity 2</td>
<td>Quantity 3</td>
<td>Result</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepper</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Piper nigrum</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plantain</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Plantago major</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Plantago lanceolata</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radish</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Raphanus sativus</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rue</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ruta graveolens</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage</td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Most likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Salvia officinalis</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smallage (Wild Celery)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Apium graveolens</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urine</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinegar</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wormwood</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Artemisia absinthium</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarrow</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Achillea millefolium</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The public are often surprised that exotic spices such as pepper would have been available. The map below shows the extent of possible trade via the Silk Route which, as it left China, followed a northern and southern route. The northern route crossed to Eastern Europe and the Crimea, then across the Black and Marmara Seas and the Balkans and on to Venice. The southern route travelled through Turkestan, Iran, Mesopotamia and Anatolia and into the Mediterranean. To take pepper as an example, Aldhelm of Malmesbury (7th c) composed an enigma for which pepper was the solution ‘I season feasts of kings and extravagant dishes, also sauces and kitchen stews’\(^\text{15}\), suggesting that pepper was well known and available.

![Map of Silk Road and Arab trade](http://www.muslimheritage.com/uploads/Map_of_Silk_road_and_Arab_trade.JPG)

Cameron and others do not set much store by Bishop Cyneheard of Winchester’s eighth century complaint that he could not obtain many foreign ingredients, reasoning that in compiling Bald I and II certain ingredients and remedies contained in the Latin sources were omitted and that such omissions involved exotic elements presumably not available to the Anglo Saxon leech. This suggests that those included would have been available. He also surmises that such a large pharmacopoeia was not the product of mindless copying of medical sources but reflects the alternative remedies given for the same ailment that would have enabled the Anglo Saxon Leech to make a remedy from the ingredients readily available in any particular circumstance.

The climate in England between AD500-1200 was 1-2 degrees warmer than it is today, making it feasible for typically Mediterranean plants to have been grown in Southern England, even if on an annual basis or in sheltered monastic gardens. Evidence for such gardens is not as plentiful for Anglo Saxon England as it is for the continent. However, we know that there was a garden at Ely from the 7th century and that ‘the first abbot was famed for his planting and grafting skills in the garden and orchard’\(^\text{16}\). Nearby Thorney was also famous for its garden. That 1085 vineyards were recorded in the Domesday Book (excluding those owned by the King) is a testament to this warmer climate.

\(^{15}\) Cameron, 1993, p.103  
\(^{16}\) Voigts, 1979, p.265
The identification of plant based ingredients can be considerably problematic and has been the subject of research. Identification can be aided by use of the Herbarium which provides a Latin equivalent, as well as by the plant’s morphology as implied in the name and in the medicinal use of a particular plant which may have changed little over the centuries. However, such clues are often insufficient to provide a firm Linnaean identification.

‘Magical’ Remedies

Anglo Saxon remedies might be either wholly herbal, a combination of the herbal and the magical or wholly magical and Cameron notes that magical remedies appear to have been applied to ailments where the existing herbal remedies would have proved ineffective. I use the term ‘magical’ warily as elements we would now term ‘magical’ appear to have received no such differentiation from Anglo Saxons. Indeed, there is no Old English word for the umbrella term ‘magic’ as we would use it today, although there are Old English words for elements we would consider ‘magical’. Such remedies take the form of either charms or amulets, both of which could be Christian or non-Christian. The Christian church did not condemn the magical aspect of remedies but rather any non-Christian rationale behind them and a remedy involving Christian magic was acceptable. Care should be taken when designating a particular element to a remedy as magical as an apparently non-rational component could have a rational basis. The following remedy appears in Bald III (no.71) and the singing of the paternoster appears to be a timing device rather than a supernatural element of the remedy:

For an ulcer ... take a handful of springwort, and a handful of waybread, and a handful of maythe, and a handful of the lower part of dock, that which will float, boil in butter, filter the salt and the foam off, add a little English honey, put it over a fire to boil, once it is boiling sing three ‘pater noster’ over it, take it off again, then sing ‘pater noster’ nine times onto it, and boil it up thrice, and take it off the boil as often, and cure with it after’ (translation from Pollington)

Charms

The great majority of charms within the OE corpus are medicinal. Charms act as intermediaries between the home world and the wider, unknown world, removing the ailment from the first sphere to the wilds from whence it came. Griffiths suggests that the repetition and alliteration evident in charms may not only have aided memory but also have an emphatic quality ‘indicating the assumed power of statement over event’. Narrative charms, such as remedy number 158 in the Lacnunga which recounts events in Christ’s life to find lost cattle, seeks to harness persuasive power by establishing a symbolic link with the past. ‘The spoken verse charm is intended to control and direct the raw potency of the healing materials’, whilst any written component may preserve the power.

Grendon classified charms in the following manner:

- Exorcism charms – drive away a disease spirit.
- Herbal charms – the leech addresses the plants directly and enchant them.
- Transference charms – transfer the disease from the patient to another creature or object.
- Amulet charms – where a plant or other object can ward off misfortune.
- Remedy Charms – where a disease demon is challenged by the healer’s own powers.

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17 Cameron, 1993, p.39
18 Pollington, 2008, p.470
19 Griffiths, 2006, p.159
20 Pollington, 2008, p.413
Many of the surviving medical charms are preserved in the Lacnunga and I have included some of these below. Whilst some charms are long, corrupted and therefore difficult to memorise and demonstrate to the public, knowledge of their contents can be used to discuss interesting aspects of Anglo Saxon charm medicine with the public. The translations are taken from Pollington.

\textit{Wið Færstice}

\textit{Against a sudden stitch:} feverfew and the red nettle that grows in through a building and waybread; boil in butter.

 Loud were they, lo! loud, when they rode over the barrow,
 They were determined as they rode over the land.
 Shield yourself now if, so you may escape this attack.
 Out, little spear, if it be in here
 (I) stood under linden, under a light shield,
 where the mighty women declared their might,
 and yelling sent their spears.
 Back to them I wish to send another
 A flying dart in opposition
 Out, little spear, if thou be herein.
 A smith sat, forged a knife;
 Small the iron, mighty the wound.
 Out, little spear, if it be in here.
 A smith sat, hammered a knife,
 A small weapon, a serious wound.
 Out, little spear, if it be in here.
 Six smiths sat, wrought slaughter-spears.
 Out, spear, not in, spear.
 If there be in here a piece of iron
 The work of witches, it must melt away.
 If you were shot in skin, or you were shot in flesh,
 Or were shot in the blood, (or were shot in the bone)
 or were shot in limb, may you life never be threatened.
 If it were the gods' shot, or it were the elves' shot,
 Or it were the witches' shot, I will now help you.
 This as a cure to you for the gods' shot, this as a cure for the elves' shot,
 This as a cure to you for the witches' shot, I wish to help you.
 Thee it fled to the mountain (wood, no rest) did have.
 Whole be (you)now, may the Lord help you.

 Then take the knife, put it into the liquid.

 The word \textit{Færstice} could refer to any sudden pain and appears to have been believed to be caused by a dart or ‘little spear’ fired by either gods, elves or witches. The charm itself identifies the strength and fierceness of those entities responsible for the pain, challenges them and describes the forging of the knife to be used in the challenge and to affect the cure. The leech’s knife has a sympathetic relationship with the little spear the charm is trying to expel. The potential entities and sites of pain are identified as targets for the remedy and caused to flee ‘to the mountain’. The charm appears non-Christian, with its references to witches, elves, gods. Pollington notes that elements of the cult of Woden (based upon knowledge of Oðinn) is reflected in the charm – the loud riders may reflect Woden’s Wild Ride, the ‘mighty women’ may refer to valkeries, and the hurling
of spears could reflect a ritual dedication to Óðinn\textsuperscript{21}. Only the last line appears to invoke the Christian God and Cameron suggests that even this is by no means certain and could refer to another god.

From a rational perspective, feverfew is used by modern herbalists in the cure of rheumatoid pain, whilst nettle’s anti-inflammatory properties have proved effective against arthritic pain.

\textbf{Nine Herbs Charm}

Remember, mugwort, what you revealed
what you set out in mighty revelation
una you are called, oldest of plants
you have might against three and against thirty
you have might against poison and against infection
you have might against the evil that travels the land.

And you, waybread, mother of plants
open to the east, mighty within,
carts ran over you, ladies rode over you,
brides cried over you, bulls snorted over you,
you withstood all then, and you were crushed
so may you withstand poison and infection
and the evil that travels around the land.

This plant is called cress, it grew on a stone,
it stands against poison, it attacks against pain.
It is called nettle, it attacks against poison,
it drives off harmful things, it casts out poison,
this is the plant that fought against the serpent,
this one has might against poison, it has might against infection,
it has might against the evil that travels round the land.

Now, atterlothe – the lesser shall drive out the greater,
(and) the greater the lesser until the cure for both be with him.
Be mindful now, maythe, of what you made known,
of what you finished at alorford
so that he should never give up his life for disease
once maythe was prepared for his food.

This is the plant which is called crab apple
a seal sent this forth across the sea’s back
as a cure for the bite of another poison.

These nine spikes against nine poisons.
A worm came crawling, he tore a man apart,
Then Woden took up nine glory-rods,
struck the adder so it then flew apart into nine,
there apple ended it and its poison
so that it would never bend into a house.

Chervil and fennel, two of great might,
the wise lord shaped these plants
while he was hanging, holy in the heavens
he set them and sent them into the seven worlds
for poor and for wealthy, as a cure for all.

\textsuperscript{21} Pollington, 2008, p.475
It stands against pain, it attacks against poison,
it has might against three and against thirty,
against foeman’s hand and against lordly sleight,
against bewitching of harmful beings.
Now these nine plants have might against nine powerful diseases
against nine poisons and against nine powerful infections
against the red poison, against the running poison,
against the white poison, against the pale blue poison,
against the yellow poison, against the green poison,
against the pale poison, against the dark blue poison, against the bright poison, against the purple poison.

Against worm-blister, against water-blister,
against thorn-blister, against thistle-blister,
against ice-blister, against poison-blister,
if any poison flying from the east
or any from the north should come
or any from the west over the tribe of men.
‘Christ stood over the ancient malevolent race;
I alone know the running rivers
and they enclose nine adders,
all weeds may now spring up as herbs,
seas slide apart, all salt water
while I blow this poison from you.’

Mugwort, waybread which has opened from the east, lamb’s cress, attorlothe, maythe, nettle, wood sourapple, chervil and fennel, old soap; work the herbs to a powder, mix them with the soap, and
with the apple’s juice; make a past from water and from ashes; take fennel, boil it in the paste and warm it with the mixture when he puts on the salve, both before and after; sing the charm on each
of the herbs thrice before they will be used, and on the apple likewise; and sing the same charm into
the man’s mouth and into both ears and onto the wound before he puts on the salve.

The charm itself is considerably corrupted, making translation difficult. Cameron has judged that
the salve was used for haemorrhoids and the charm follows and precedes remedies for
haemorrhoids. However, the properties of the plants invoked appear to be more wide ranging and
the OE word onflyge (flying venom) that occurs in this charm and elsewhere suggests that Anglo
Saxon medicine believed that illness could be caused by ‘the evil that travels round the land’.
Pollington explains the charm as invoking the powers of nine herbs against nine specific poisons or
diseases, each of which is associated with its own colour. As with the Wīð Færstice charm, the
cult of Woden appears to be invoked, with reference to Odin hanging from the sacred tree
Yggdrasil:

the wise lord shaped these plants
while he was hanging, holy in the heavens

However, Christ is also invoked and Cameron notes that this charm could be interpreted as a non-
Christian charm with Christian elements or a Christian charm with non-Christian elements. The
number of non-Christian elements would appear to predominate.

22 Cameron, 1993, p.147
23 Pollington, 2008, p.476
24 Cameron, 1993, p.146
Wið Cyrnel

The Wið Cyrnel charm uses counting down as a means of reducing the ailment, perhaps specifically lumps:

For Lumps:
Nine were Noth’s sisters
Then changed the 9 into 8
and the 8 into 7
and the 7 into 6
and the 6 into 5
and the 5 into 4
and the 4 into 3
and the 3 into 2
and the 2 into 1
and the 1 into none
(Let) this (be) your remedy for a lump and for scrofula and for worms and for every kind of harm.
Sing the Benedicite nine times.

Griffiths notes that Noth is a personal name meaning boldness or daring but that he cannot find any supernatural connotations and suggests the name may refer to a story now lost.\(^\text{25}\)

Wið Dweorh

The Wið Dweorh charm against fever is as follows:

Against a dwarf one must take seven small holy wafers, such as one makes holy communion with, and write these names on each wafer: Maximian, Malchus, John, Martimian, Dionysius, Constantine, Serafion. Then again the charm, which hereafter is quoted, one must sing, first in the left ear, then in the right ear, then upon the top of the man’s head. And then go to a maiden and (let her) hang it around his neck, and do so for three days; it will speedily be better for the patient.

Here came entering in a (?) powerful being
He had for him his coat at hand, said that you were his steed,
Laid his reins on your neck. They began to move out of the area;
As soon as they got out of the area, then his limbs began to cool.
Then came entering in the beast’s sister;
Then she settled in and swore oaths
That never this would harm the sick person,
Nor (harm) anyone for whom this charm could be obtained,
Or who knew how to intone this charm.
Amen. Fiat. (So be it.)

This charm has been corrupted and translations vary. Again, it would appear to be a combination of Christian and non-Christian material. The remedy was probably intended to cure a fever and reflects a relationship between dwarves and fevers now lost. It combines a charm to be sung three times over the patient and an amulet in the form of inscribed holy communion wafers.

\(^{25}\) Griffiths, 2006, p.186
The charm for *Wæterælfadle* that follows is believed to possible be a cure for chicken pox as the livid nails, light sensitivity and wounds that might burst suggest this illness. If one is in the water elf sickness, then his fingernails are livid and his eyes watering and he wishes to look downward. Do this for him as a treatment: Boarthroat, cassock, the lower part of iris, yewberry, lupin, elecampane, marshmallow heads, fen mint, dill, lily, attorlothe, pennyroyal, horehound, dock, elder, centaury, wormwood, strawberry leaves, comfrey. Pour over with ale, add holy water, sing this charm over three times:

For the wounds I have bound on the best of battle-bandages,  
So that the wounds may not burn or burst,  
Nor expand, nor multiply, nor skip about,  
Nor wound grow, nor lesion deepen;  
But to him (I) myself held out a cup of health,  
Nor may it pain you more than earth hurts earth.

Sing this many times: ‘Earth bear on thee with all her might and main.’ This charm may be sung on wounds.

**Amulets**

Cameron notes that the number of amuletic remedies is not large and most are found in Leechbook III. Amulets could be herbal, such as the one described below, material (the spindle whorl used in Bald III, no.6, or the stones from fledgling swallows used in Bald III, no.1) or written (see the *Wið Dweorh* charm). An insight into how effective these amulets were deemed to be can be seen in the warning found at the end of remedy 37 in Leechbook III.

Bind on the left thigh, up against the genital area, twelve grains of coriander seed, and a boy or a girl must do it; as the child is born, take the plants away lest the innards come out’ (Pollington).

**Number Magic**

It is not uncommon for remedies to use the number three or multiples of three in the instructions, either with reference to the amount of material to be used, how it should be prepared, or how many times the remedy should be taken. In the Lacnunga such ‘number magic’ using the number 3 occurs in 31 remedies, whilst in Bald III they occur in 20 remedies. The number 3 and its multiples occur extensively in Norse mythology and therefore probably reflects Anglo Saxon beliefs prior to the conversion to Christianity and the endurance of elements of this lost belief system. Just one example of the importance of the number three can be represented by the world Ash tree Yggdrasíl, and there are a great many other examples that could be cited. Yggdrasíl connected the nine worlds of Asgard, Vanahem, Alféim, Midgard, Jötunheim, Svartalfheim, Niflheim, Muspellheim, and Hel. The sacred tree had three roots under which there were three water sources: the spring Hvergelmir in Nifl-heim, Mimir’s Well in Midgard and the Urðar Fountain in Asgard. Yggdrasíl was watered by the three Norns, sisters and goddesses of fate called Urð, Verandi and Skulđ who represented the Past, Present and Future. It was from Yggdrasíl that Óðinn (Woden), himself one of three brothers, hung for nine days and nights to gain knowledge of eighteen runes. There are a great many other examples that could be cited

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26 Cameron, 1993, p.154-5  
27 Ibid., p.133
There are a number of remedies specifically concerned with gynaecology and obstetrics and they highlight the many health problems facing Anglo Saxon women. As the section in Bald’s Leechbook dealing with gynaecological medicine is lost surviving female medicine comes mostly from Leechbook III, in addition to charms in the Lacnunga and the occasional remedy in the Herbarium. Of the fourteen remedies in the Lacnunga and Bald III relating specifically to female ailments five can be described as magical whilst the remainder employ herbal remedies. Cameron has suggested that the magical remedies such as charms indicate the ‘helplessness’ of the Anglo Saxon practitioner as they were generally reserved for ailments that would not respond to herbal medicine28. Of these five magical remedies (Lacnunga nos. 169, 170 and 171 and Bald III nos. 18 and 37) four are for being unable to bear, deliver or nourish a child, ailments that may still defy modern medicine. The fifth, Bald III, no.18, is for womb pain and although this remedy is magical, a herbal remedy for the same complaint is given in Bald III no. 70. The three Lacnunga charms are as follows and are interesting because in each case it is the female patient that enacts her treatment which cannot be carried out by the leech on her behalf:

Lacnunga Charm 169
Gif wif ne mæge bearn beran

If a woman cannot bear a child: Let the woman who cannot nourish her child go to the grave of a dad man and then step three times over the grave and say these words three times:

This as a relief to me for the hateful slow birth
This as a relief to me for the sad stillbirth
This as a relief to me for the hateful lame birth

and when the woman will be with child and goes to bed, to her husband, then she is to say:

Up I go, step over you
with a living child, not a dying (one)
with a full born (one), not with a doomed (one)

and when the mother feels that the child is alive, she is to go then to a church and when she comes before the altar she is then to say:

To Christ I said, declared this.

This charm could represent an act of defiance with the naming of the threats to a healthy birth whilst the grave may represent the boundary between the living and the non-living, just as the mother is the boundary between her unborn child and its potentially living state. The final act, the mother going to church, looked forward to her churching after a successful birth29. A woman’s ‘churching’ was an official ecclesiastical ceremony possibly rooted in Levitus ruling that ‘the childbearing woman needs ritual purification’30.

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28 Cameron, 1993, p.130
29 Weston, 1995, p.289
30 Ibid., p.287-8
Lacnunga Charm 170

Se wifmon se hyre beran afedan ne mæge

The woman who cannot nourish her child, let her take herself a piece of her own child’s grave, afterwards cover it in black wool and sell it to traders and then say:

I sell it, you buy it
This black wool and the seeds of this sorrow.

The words ‘sell’ and ‘buy’ mark the movement between the past misfortune and a better future outcome. This charm raises interesting social questions. Did the merchant know what he was buying and was a willing participant who saw the transaction as fulfilling part of his social duty to play a role in the woman’s healing or did the unfortunate woman have to hide the bundle among other products she was selling, such as fleece or cloth and mutter the charm out of the merchant’s hearing?

Lacnunga Charm 171

Se wifmon se hyre beran afedan ne mæge

The woman who cannot nourish her child: let her then take milk from a cow of one colour in her hand and sip it up with her mouth and go then to running water and spit the milk into it and take up with the same hand a mouthful of the water and swallow it; let her then say these words:

Everywhere I have carried the splendid stomach-strong
with this splendid well-fed (one)
which I wish to have for myself and go home.

When she will go to the brook, she must not look about at all, nor when she will go back; and let her then go into another house than the one she left and take food there.

The stream water and the cow’s milk are both nourishing liquids and she nourishes herself as she wishes to nourishes her child and then she takes nourishment from another woman.

Rationale Remedies

The majority of remedies relating specifically to female ailments were herbal. Lacnunga no. 152 presents a remedy for a woman being struck dumb. This was considered to be a sign of ‘suffocation of the womb’ and the remedy of pennyroyal bound in wool and laid ‘under the woman’ may actually be an emmenagogue pessary. Pennyroyal (a powerful emmenagogue) is also used for expelling a dead child (Bald III, no. 37) and for womb pain (Bald III, no. 70). Sound advice was also given to pregnant women, as stated in Bald III, no. 37:

Earnestly one must refuse a pregnant woman that she should eat anything salty, nor anything sweet, nor drink beer, nor eat pigs flesh, nor anything fatty, nor drink till she be drunk, nor travel afar, nor ride too vigorously on a horse, lest the baby come away from her before the right time. (Pollington)
Surgery

Cameron notes that surgical procedures appear infrequently in the surviving Anglo Saxon texts and that, apart from bloodletting, three examples represent ‘the only surgical treatments found in the Anglo Saxon medical corpus’. One remedy gives instructions for the repair of a harelip which has not yet been traced to any source and so its origins are unclear - it could originate from either Mediterranean or Northern European medical tradition:

\[
\text{With hærscearde: } \text{hwit cwudu gecnuwa swiðe smale, do æges þat white to 7 meng swa þu dest teafor, onsníð mid seaxe, seowa mid seolce fæste, smire mid þonne mid ðære seafel utan & innan ær se seoloc rotige. Gif tosomne teo rece mid handa, smire eft sona.}
\]

For harelip: pound mastic very fine, add white of an egg and mix as you do vermillion, cut with a knife, sew securely with silk, then anoint with the salve outside and inside before the silk rot. If it pulls together, arrange it with the hand, anoint again immediately.

Mastic is resin obtained from the tree \textit{Pistacia lentiscus} (Mastic Tree) which is native to the Mediterranean. Mastic resin contains alpha-pinene which is strongly antiseptic which would probably aid the healing of the wound whilst the egg white element would help the salve adhere to the wound. I have made up this slave at a show and applied it to the skin on my hand to which it adhered readily and dried to form a crust (which I imagine would have cause a fair amount of pain in itself). The importance placed on the role of the salve is evident in the instructions to reapply if adjustment of the lip is required. I have asked a variety of medical practitioners whether silk would dissolve in a wound, as indicated in this remedy, and have received an equal number of confirmations as denials.

The second surgical procedure involves the amputation of a limb which has become black and dead. The instructions refer to the use of emetics and purgatives rather than bleeding to ‘\textit{cleanse the corrupt humour and its red bile sickness}’ which suggests a classical source for the remedy. The leech is instructed to ‘\textit{cut away all the dead and unfeeling part as far as the living body}’.

Cameron notes that whilst the instructions are clear and sensible, a glaring omission is the control of blood loss. He speculates that cautery might have been used throughout and cautery certainly appears to be used to seal the wound as the final part of the remedy states ‘\textit{when you set fire on a patient, then take tender leek leaves and pounded salt, lay over the places; then the heat of the fire is the sooner drawn away}’.

The third example of surgery is the lancing of an abscess on the liver which Cameron states was probably caused by invasion of \textit{Entamoeba histolytica} (see ‘Dysentery’ below). An incision was made to draw off the pass and, in the classical sources, a wick was inserted and the incision closed around it so that further pus could be drained off. This latter instruction is omitted from the Old English translation, indicating that the procedure was not known to the scribe. This procedure was used until the 19th century when it was finally abandoned because of its high mortality rate.

\[\text{31 Cameron, 1993, p.173}\]
\[\text{32 Ibid., p.169}\]
\[\text{33 Chevallier, 2001, p.250}\]
\[\text{34 Ibid., p.169}\]
\[\text{35 Cameron, 1993, p.170}\]
\[\text{36 Ibid., p.170}\]
\[\text{37 Ibid., p.171}\]
\[\text{38 Ibid., p.172}\]
\[\text{39 Ibid., p.172}\]
Trepanning

Trepanning is the removal of a piece of the skull. The rationale for the procedure is unclear and it could have a religious, magical or medical basis, or possibly a combination of all three. As the rationale is unclear I do not demonstrate this procedure as a remedy. Pollington reports that thirteen skulls displaying evidence of trepanation have been discovered that date from the Saxon era, covering both the pagan and Christian periods, and that at least nine of these show signs of healing. Making a hole in the skull involves cutting through the skin, three layers of bone and the membrane covering the brain. Trephination uses a trephine which bores a hole, as opposed to the scraping, cutting and/or gouging of Trepanning.

Classical Sources of Old English Medical Texts

Access to classical sources would have been limited to those who could read Latin and/or Greek. However, once translated into Old English their audience would have been enlarged (although still limited) and further dissemination could have occurred orally. It is therefore useful to consider such sources for the surviving Old English medical texts as have been identified.

Galen (AD129-210)

If there is one ancient doctor the public has heard of it is Galen. Even if they haven’t heard of Galen they will probably have a vague awareness of ‘the four humours’ or ‘blood letting’. Galenic medicine undoubtedly became the single most influential theory in Western medicine, driving the direction of medieval university medical faculties and the medical profession. However, its later overwhelming influence should not be imposed upon Anglo Saxon medicine as the principals of the four humours and their balance through diet and blood letting ‘do not seem to have received as much attention from the Anglo Saxons’. Cameron notes that of the over 1300 remedies contained within the three leechbooks and the Lacnunga less than 50 require bleeding. ‘Anglo Saxons do not seem to have grasped the theory of the four humours and the development of phlebotomy … References to humours in their medicine are more to ‘harmful humours’ than to specifically unbalanced ones.’ Cameron also says he has traced all these remedies to Mediterranean sources, suggesting that phlebotomy was not a native medicine.

Galen ‘championed, systematized and developed Greek medicine … known as the ‘Hippocratic Corpus’. A brief summary of Galenic medicine follows:

- The skeleton was the fundamental structure of the body which housed numerous vessels and organs that were linked by channels which carried fluids and spirits which gave the body life, heat and sensation.
- Venous blood nourished the body and was produced in the liver from digested food. Some of this blood was mixed with the spirit pneuma (extracted from air in the lungs) in the heart to produce arterial blood which gave heat and life. Both were believed to be constantly used up and replaced by the body.
- The ‘soul’ oversaw all aspects of an animal’s or human’s life through ‘vital spirits’. The soul, though invisible, was material and therefore died with the body.

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40 Pollington, 2008, p.416
41 Cameron, 1993, p.48
42 Ibid., p.168
43 Kusukawa, 2004, p.5
• ‘Vital Spirits’ were carried by the blood and gave life, ‘Natural Spirits’ carried nourishment and ‘Animal Spirits’ carried thoughts, sensation and movement via nerves.

• All parts of the body were reducible to the four qualities: hot, cold, wet, dry, and their differing proportions were responsible for an individual’s complexion or temperament.

• The balance of the qualities was maintained by the interaction of the four humours, these being yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and pure blood. The dominant humour within an individual influenced their temperament as follows:

  Yellow Bile: Hot headed
  Black Bile: Sad, low spirited
  Phlegm: Lethargic, apathetic
  Pure Blood: Warm, pleasant

• Humoural theory was based upon Aristolean ideas that all things were composed of the four elements, these being Fire, Earth, Air and Water.

• Disease was caused by an imbalance in the four humours. Such an imbalance could be caused by six major influences, these being contact with ambient air, motion and rest, sleep and waking, substances taken, substances voided or retained, what happens to the soul.

The relationship between the earthly elements, qualities, humours and complexion can be summed up as follows:
Dioscorides (c. AD 40-c.90)
Elements of his five volume Materia medica were influential up until the 17th century and are usually credited to him or to Apuleius. This work detailed descriptions of the appearance of plants and listed their uses, along with techniques for harvesting and storage.

Oribasius (AD325-397)
Along with Cassius Felix of Numidia and Alexander of Tralles, Oribasius was influential in transmitting the works of Galen. He compiled his Medical Collection in seventy books and cited at least 31 authorities. This work was condensed to form the nine books of his Synopsis and he also wrote Euporistes, a four book manual on hygiene, simple medicines and diseases.

Cassius Felix (5th c. AD)
Cassius Felix wrote De medicina ex Graecis Logicae Sectae auctoribus liber translatus which included Greek medical terms along with their Latin translations. Bede quoted from this text.

Alexander of Tralles (AD525 – 605)
His best known work was Libri duodecim (The Twelve Books of Medicine). This work covered such areas as ailments of the scalp and ears, epilepsy, angina, lung complaints, heart complaints, stomach complaints, cholera, diabetes, all the way through to Podagra (Gout). No part of this work was dedicated to surgery. Alexander of Tralles followed Hippocratic and Galenic medicine, but also believed amulets preferable to draughts and enemas for many patients. This magical element was disapproved of by the Church, although Alexander was a Christian. His work was translated into Latin along with that of Philumenus and Philigrius to form the Practica Alexandri.

Philumenus (circa 4thc. AD)
A contemporary of Galen, elements of his works survive in Practica Alexandri and in the works of Oribasius.

Philagrius of Epirus (3rdc. AD)
Elements of his works survive in Practica Alexandri and in the works of Oribasius.

Marcellus of Bordeaux (Empiricus) (4th-5th c. AD)
Marcellus compiled a large collection of rational and folk remedies as well as charms in his De medicamentis.

Caelius Aurelianus (c.420)
His vast works were condensed and then reworked to produce Liber Aurelii de acutis passionibus and Liber Esculapii de chronicis passionibus.

Pliny the Elder (AD c.23-70)
Pliny wrote Historia naturalis.

Isidore of Seville (c.560-636)
Isidore was the archbishop of Seville and wrote Etymologiae sive origins in which the fourth volume concerns medicine and drew on various works including those of Caelius Aurelianus.

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44 Porter, 1999, p.80
45 Cameron, 1993, p.67
Efficacy of Remedies

A common question from the public is ‘Did these medicines work?’ to which there is no simple answer. Certain remedies have parallels with modern effective remedies, a simple one being pouring warmed hen’s fat into the patient’s ear to cure an ear ache (Bald III, no.3) which mirrors the modern practice of using warmed oil to loosen excessive ear wax. However, the practice of using red thread to bind madder root to a patient’s head to cure a headache (Bald III, no.1) would fail modern clinical trials! Yet one cannot discount such a remedy so readily. If the patient truly believed that such a remedy would provide relief and if that patient had complete faith in the leech who was tying the madder to the head then the often quoted ‘placebo effect’ could cause this remedy to be effective. One cannot truly judge the efficacy of Anglo Saxon medicine without replicating the conditions and the mindset of the times – an impossible task. Would a woman who was having difficulty delivering her baby be spurred on to give a final effective effort once a child had tied twelve coriander grains to her thigh, reassured by the belief that the baby must now come out (Bald III, no.37)?

Even seeking a firm, modern, scientific answer to the efficacy of a particular remedy can prove challenging, if not controversial. In his Anglo Saxon Medicine M L Cameron cites a particular remedy for a styce whose effectiveness was based upon scientific fact and it is an explanation that appears in a current GCSE text book on the History of Medicine. This example deserves examination as it demonstrates the various difficulties that can arise in seeking scientific confirmation of efficacy. The remedy is as follows:

Make an eye salve for a styce: take cropleac ‘onion’ and garlic in equal amounts of both, pound well together, take wine and bull’s gall equal amounts of both, mix with the ‘leeks’, then put in a brass vessel, let stand for nine nights in the brass vessel, strain through a cloth and clear well, put in a horn and about night time put on the eye with a feather; the best remedy.

Cameron argued that staphylococcal infection of the eyelash follicle is the usual cause of a styce and that the antibacterial properties of onion and garlic would have inhibited staphylococcal growth, whilst Bull’s Gall has detergent properties which would have been effective against the same. Medieval wine, being rich in acetic acid and tartarates would have reacted with the copper in the vessel to form copper salts which are cytotoxic and would therefore kill all living cells, including the bacteria. The result would have been an effective remedy.

Brennessel, Drout and Gravel set out to ‘provide empirical support for Cameron’s thesis that some Anglo-Saxon remedies would have worked to cure the ailments for which they were intended’ and used the remedy for a styce as an example. Their investigation highlighted many of the problems facing those wishing to interpret Anglo Saxon remedies. Firstly, as previously discussed, identifying the plant used can present enormous difficulties. Even when the plant has been identified, with regard to vegetables, even old cultivars can only be traced to the 19th century and so ‘authentic’ materials cannot always be used. Other problems arose as to the amounts of each ingredients used and the methods (for example was the brass pot left uncovered?). Their list of the combination of ingredients tested gives some idea of the scale of these difficulties:

Leek, garlic, wine, oxgall, brass
Onion, garlic, wine, oxgall, brass
Garlic, wine, oxgall, brass
Leek, garlic, wine, brass
Onion, garlic, wine, brass

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46 Brennessel, Drout and Gravel, 2005, p.184
Leek, wine, oxgall, brass
Onion, wine, oxgall, brass
Garlic, wine, brass
Leek, wine, brass
Onion, wine, brass
Wine, oxgall, brass
Leek, water, brass
Onion, water, brass
Garlic, water, brass
Oxgall, water, brass

The team tested the complete remedy and its individual components using the Kirby-Bauer method with different types of bacteria evenly spread across the surface of Petri dishes. The bacteria used were Gram negative *Escherichia coli*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, Gram positive *Streptococcus mutans* and *Mycobacterium smegmatis*.

Their results indicted that whilst some of the individual ingredients showed anti-microbial activity, when combined they were ineffective. They suggest that leaving the ingredients to stand so long in the brass container rendered them ineffective. Similar investigations were completed on other remedies identified by Cameron and they also generally proved ineffective. Obviously further testing is required to confirm their findings. In the meantime my interpretation is that:

- Assumptions should not be made on the efficacy or otherwise of Anglo Saxon remedies.
- Such scientific testing cannot replicate the psychosomatic elements at play during the administration of remedies and so cannot provide a complete picture of the efficacy of such remedies.

Another observation often made by the public is that the remedies **must have worked** for them to have been recorded. A later example serves to emphasise that remedies could endure despite being medically ineffective. Blood-letting (phlebotomy) had its roots in Galenic medicine and was practiced on the assumption that blood was constantly produced and burned up by the body and that the balance of a patient’s humours could be restored by drawing off blood. From the 17th century Galenic medicine was being rejected with such discoveries as the circulation of the blood by William Harvey (1628 – *De Motu Cordis*) and with the plethora of new models of the human body such as Rene Descartes’ mechanical theory, Herman Boerhaave’s hydraulic model and William Cullen’s ‘Sensible Body’. One might suppose that the practice of blood-letting would also be rejected along with its theoretical basis. Not so. William Cullen (1710–90), despite rejecting humoral medicine, simply gave phlebotomy a new theoretical basis that suited his new model, by being ‘one of the most powerful means of diminishing the activity … of the sanguiferous system’.

In today’s society there exists an expectation that the medical profession will be able to produce a cure in the vast majority of cases. In the Anglo Saxon period, when death and disease was so much in evidence, such an expectation probably did not exist and certainly in the medieval period a physician and his remedies was not seen to have failed if the patient died provided all that could have been done was tried. The reality of death is expressed in King Alfred’s writings (Metre 27, 6-24).

*Why can you not await that death that the Lord has destined for you, bitter enough in its own way, since now with each day it speeds towards you? Can you not see how he is always pursuing all of*

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47 Elmer and Grell, 2004, p.170
48 Griffiths, 2006, p.69
Earth’s species – beasts and birds alike? In just the same way, Death, the dreadful hunter, is on the track of mankind throughout the world and he will not give up on any spoor until he has laid hands on that he has been chasing so long…”

The Old English poem *The Fortunes of Men*, taken from the Exeter Book, graphically illustrates the Anglo Saxon acceptance of illness and death as part of life. In particular, lines 15-26 describe how:

Famine shall make one its prey; one wild weather shall sweep away; one the spear shall spill; one warfare shall destroy. One will have to endure a life deprived of his eye’s light and to grope about with his hands; one, lame in a foot, infirm from lesions of the sinew, will have to bewail his painful affliction and, oppressed in mind, mourn his destiny. From a tree in the forest one shall tumble – wingless, and yet he is in flight – and flails in the air until there is no further branch of the tree and then he falls to its foot unconscious; robbed of his soul he tumbles to the ground, and his spirit is on its way  

This is not to say that the only real value Anglo Saxon medicine had was in its placebo effect. Below is a table of the most commonly used plants, as given by Cameron and including those I have selected from the Lacnunga, as listed under ‘Materia Medica’, along with their properties and uses in modern herbal medicine (taken from Chevallier’s Encyclopaedia of Medicinal Plants) and as given in the Lacnunga, Herbarium and Bald III for comparison. Such comparative analysis does, however, come with several caveats and the table is only intended to give a rough portrait of the potential efficacy of Anglo Saxon medicine. The difficulties involved in plant identification have already been outlined and there can be no guarantee that the current identifications are correct. Also combined are modern diagnoses and disease classifications with Anglo Saxon interpretations of disease and symptoms. The separation of some thousand years between the two presents significant pitfalls and one cannot be sure that similar ailments are being compared. In addition, I have only used one herbal medical text book and different or supplementary modern usages may exist. Having stated the above, I do feel that the table below reveals an element of overlap and continuity in the use of some herbs which supports the potential efficacy of some remedies. This continuity is highlighted in red

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plant</th>
<th>Modern Uses</th>
<th>Anglo Saxon Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attorlothe</td>
<td>No firm identification of plant.</td>
<td>Heart complaints, lung disease, cough and spew blood, inflammation, emmenagogue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barley Hordeum vulgare</td>
<td>Soothes inflammation of the gut and urinary tract. Aids digestion of milk. A barley poultice can reduce inflammation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beet Beta vulgaris</td>
<td>White beet supports liver, bile ducts and gall bladder and lowers blood fat levels.</td>
<td>Headache, bone salve, disease of limbs, side ache, lung disease, burst eruptions, wounds, adder bite, fever, canker, pain in innards, mad dog bite.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Bradley, 1982
| **Betony**  
*Stachys officinalis* | Against headaches and facial pain, mildly sedative and therefore relieves tension, stimulates the digestive system and the liver, helps staunch nose bleeds. | Bone salve, headache, limb disease, lung salve, side ache, lung disease, loin pain, inflammation, joint complaints, bleeding from mouth, fainting, yellow sickness, coughs, gripes, ache in abdomen, palsy, wounds. |
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bishopswort</strong></td>
<td>No clear identification.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Carline Thistle**  
*Carlina vulgaris* | Not listed |  |
| **Celandine**  
*Chelidonium majus* | Mild sedative and relaxant, lung complaints, antispasmodic, improves bile flow, jaundice, eczema, warts, ringworm, tumours. | Bone salve, emetic, limb ache, eye complaints, wenns, inflammation, fever, lice, ear salve. |
| **Centaury**  
*Erythraea centaurium* | Stimulates appetite and digestive secretions. | Sinew spasm, poison, diarrhoea, worms, emetic, inflammation, cough, wounds, pain in spleen, adder bite. |
| **Cockle**  
*Melandrium album* | A weed of cultivation with poisonous seeds. | Headache, diarrhoea, lung disease, heart pain, yellow sickness, continuous thirst, wounds. |
| **Coriander**  
| **Elecampane**  
*Inula helenium* | Contains Insulin which has mucilaginous properties and soothes bronchial linings, Alantolactone is effective against TB and is thought to be an anti-inflammatory. An expectorant, antiseptic, soothes coughs, eliminates worms, aids digestion. | Limb ache, side ache, lung disease, inflammation, wenns, bone salve, headache, eye ache, ear complaints, palsy, chicken pox, yellow sickness. |
| **Fennel**  
*Foeniculum vulgare* | The seeds relieve bloating, settle stomach pain, stimulate appetite, are diuretic and anti-inflammatory, can be infused to make a gargle for sore throats. Fennel increases breast milk production and makes an eyewash. | Wenns, emetic, sudden sickness, loin pain, inflammation, coughing, fainting, bladder pain, bite, yellow sickness, gripes, ache in lower abdomen. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plant</th>
<th>Uses</th>
<th>Side Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feverfew <em>Tanacetum parthenium</em></td>
<td>Migraine, rheumatoid arthritis, analgesic, reduces fever, promotes menstrual flow.</td>
<td>Eye salve, bone salve, headache, disease of limbs, inflammation, ear complaints, sudden stitch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garlic <em>Allium sativum</em></td>
<td>Antibiotic, expectorant, increases sweating, lowers blood pressure, reduces blood clotting, anti-diabetic, expels worms, lowers blood fat levels.</td>
<td>Wenns, bone salve, headache, limb ache, eye ache, inflammation, side ache, emetic, ear salve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groundsel <em>Senecio vulgaris</em></td>
<td>None listed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindhealth <em>Agrimonia eupatoria</em> or <em>Teucrium scorodonia</em></td>
<td>Agrimonia eupatoria: Wounds, staunch bleeding, diarrhoea, cystitis, kidney stones, sore throat, rheumatism, arthritis. Teucrium scorodonia is no longer used as it is suspected of causing liver damage.</td>
<td>Headache, side ache, Pod Agra, cough, bites, inflammation, continuous thirst.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horehound <em>Marrubium vulgare</em></td>
<td>Expectorant properties make it useful for bronchial damage and ailments, increases the appetite and supports digestion.</td>
<td>Side ache, poison, lung disease, lice, worms, cough, stomach pain, inflammation, stiffness of the body, ear pain, breast pain, loin pain, palsy, chicken pox.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy <em>Hedera helix</em></td>
<td>None listed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lupin <em>Lupinus</em></td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oak <em>Quercus robur</em></td>
<td>Sore throats, haemorrhoids, diarrhoea, dysentery, rectal bleeding, eczema.</td>
<td>Bites, aching thighs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennyroyal <em>Mentha pulegium</em></td>
<td>Powerfully stimulates uterine muscles and menstruation (therefore dangerous during pregnancy). Said to be effective against flatulence, colic, headaches, minor respiratory infections and itchiness.</td>
<td>Chicken pox, eye ailments, worms, headache, inflammation, side ache, Pod Agra, stomach ache, emmenagogue, sore body, itching genitals, fever, wounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Symptoms</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pepper</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>Piper nigrum</em></td>
<td>Stimulates circulation and the digestive system, is antiseptic and antibacterial, reduces fever.</td>
<td>Eye complaints, coughs, wenns, lung disease, chest pain, inflammation, asthma, pain in innards, loinache, thigh ache, fever, tooth ache, oozing gall, yellow sickness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plantain</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>Plantago major</em> and <em>Plantago lanceolata</em></td>
<td>Contains aucubin which increases the excretion of uric acid by the kidneys, along with apigenin which is an anti-inflammatory. Stauches blood flow, encourages tissue repair, treats bruises and broken bones (can be used as an alternative to comfrey). It is a diuretic, expectorant, anticatarrhal.</td>
<td>Flying venom, sudden eruption, bone salve, headache, sudden stitch, heart pain, stomach ache, bleeding rectum, wounds, adder bite, scorpion bite, worms, fever, Pod Agra, pain in sinews, ulcer, dog bite, throat pain,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Radish</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>Raphanus sativus</em></td>
<td>Yields a volatile oil, Raphanin, which has antibacterial properties. Stimulates the appetite and digestion.</td>
<td>Wenns, bone salve, headache, limb ache, side ache, lung disease, sudden sickness, inflammation, heavy stomach, lice, heart pain, oozing gall, cough, stomach ache, palsy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rue</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>Ruta graveolens</em></td>
<td>Stimulates menstruation, used as an eye wash.</td>
<td>Eye complaints, headache, heart ailments, bone salve, lung salve, side ache, inflammation, ear complaints, fainting, liver sickness, nose bleeds, stomach pain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sage</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>Salvia officinalis</em></td>
<td>Astringent, antiseptic, clears catarrh, reduces sweating, relieves menopausal symptoms, reduces breast milk production, sore throat, mouth ulcers, sore gums, regulates menstruation, asthma.</td>
<td>Wenns, lung salve, cough and narrowness, fainting, inflammation, itching genitals, itching bottom, ulcers, yellow sickness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smallage (Celery)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>Apium graveolens</em></td>
<td>Volatile oil has a calming effect on the nervous system and lowers high blood pressure. Seeds protect the liver and lower blood fat levels. Seeds are also mildly diuretic with antiseptic properties and therefore used for cystitis.</td>
<td>Cough, emetic, lung disease, yellow sickness, swollen eyes, bladder pain, emmenagogue, wenns, stomach pain, loin pain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wormwood</td>
<td>Digestive stimulant, moderately effective at eliminating worms, aids the absorption of nutrients, anti-inflammatory.</td>
<td>Eye complaints, bone salve, headache, limb ache, lung disease, sleeping aid, chicken pox, inflammation, lice, ring worm, nausea, bruises, worms, ear pain, bite, obstructed rectum, continuous thirst, gripes, ache in lower abdomen, wenns.</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artemisia absinthium</td>
<td>Knowable as a wound healer – its Latin name reflects its supposed use by Achilles to heal wounds. Antispasmodic, astringent, digestive aid, increases sweating, lowers blood pressure, reduces fever, mild diuretic and urinary antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, promotes menstruation, stops internal bleeding</td>
<td>Bone salve, diarrhoea, lung disease, inflammation, wenns, wound healer, tooth ache, difficulty urinating, intestine ache, heart ache, adder bite, dog bite, sting in foot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarrow</td>
<td>Achillea millefolium</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### The Anglo Saxon Leech

Whilst we are very fortunate to have a wealth of documented Anglo Saxon remedies still surviving, very little is known about the leeches themselves. It is likely that to a certain extent each individual would be their own doctor, just as today when we have a headache we self prescribe and administer paracetamol. Beyond this it is likely that ‘the majority of people who fell seriously ill … would have relied on their immediate family, kinsmen and even neighbours for support’\(^50\). Those adept at such remedies were likely to have been consulted by family and neighbours and would have an opportunity to profit from their knowledge. The importance of women in this role should not be underestimated, the woman of the family unit being the likely carer of the old, young and the sick.

It has struck me that Aelfric’s Colloquy, probably written at the end of the 10th century - beginning of the 11th century, contains the characters of a teacher, a ploughman, a shepherd, an oxherd, a hunter, a fisherman, a birdcatcher, a merchant, a tanner, a salter, a baker, a cook, a lawyer, a blacksmith, and a carpenter. This is a fairly comprehensive list of Anglo Saxon professions and yet it does not include a leech. This is perhaps because leeches were not as numerous, although one would have thought they would be at least as numerous and as necessary as lawyers. Certainly Crawford notes that the 9th century Laws of King Alfred makes provision for a leech to be found in the event of injury being caused, suggesting that medical services could be found by members of most communities; ‘if anyone strikes his neighbour with a stone or fist in such a way that he can still get about on a stick, the assailant is to get a doctor for him and do his work as long as he cannot do it himself’\(^51\). Perhaps the majority were clerical with fewer lay leeches, along with so called ‘wise-women’ who would not be considered a ‘profession’. Those remedies requiring the reciting of liturgy suggest that the clergy played no small part in the practice of Anglo Saxon medicine. However, some illustrations depict leeches as laymen, unlikely subjects if they were so few. It is

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\(^50\) Crawford, 2009, p.189

\(^51\) Ibid., p.190
possible that Aelfric did not include leeches in his list of professions because, as his Homily on St Bartholomew’s Day stated, he considered the suffering of ailments to be the Christian duty of individuals and as the characters he portrays in the Colloquy often argue their importance to society, the inclusion of leeches may have been deemed inappropriate.

*He who is infirm, let him pray to his Lord for his healing, and patiently endure the pangs...* 52

Whilst Aelfric did not include leeches in his list of professions, it is apparent that the compilers of Bald I and II considered themselves to be part of a larger community of leeches, and they use the authority of other leeches to add credibility to their remedies by stating that ‘also leeches say ...’, ‘Oxa taught this treatment...’ and ‘a treatment for lung disease Dun taught’. These quotes take us to another question regarding leeches, how were they trained. During the Anglo Saxon period the famous medical school at Salerno in Italy was developing around the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino (the first universities were not established until the 12th century). In 1063 the Archbishop of Salerno, Alphanus, wrote *Premnon Physicon* which introduced a Christianized form of Galenic medicine, whilst a monk of Monte Cassino, Constantinus Africanus (c.1020-87), translated several Greek and Arabic medical texts into Latin. His *Liber Ysagogarum* became a foundation text in the (later) medical schools which sprang up in Italy and France 53 and also the basis of the *Articella* which included Hippocratic and Galenic texts and was to become the ‘standard collection of authoritative medical texts’ for University training 54. Whilst it is possible that some Anglo Saxon leeches may have studied at Salerno their number is likely to have been very few considering the distances and costs involved. However, considering the monastic origins of surviving Old English medical texts, it is likely that those living within an Anglo Saxon monastic setting, either permanently or for education, could have had access to medical training. Chapter XVIII of Bald II says ‘Leeches teach this leechdom for the swelling and bloating of the liver’ (*læces læra þþ lanecdom wiþ lifre spyle 7 andenesse*) and leeches, both male and female, could have been trained as apprentices within the secular community.

**Women as Leeches**

It should first be stated that the Old English word *læce* refers to any healer and that the later professional distinctions and definitions do not apply in Anglo Saxon medicine. In my experience, a large part of the public’s reaction to the role played by women within Anglo Saxon medicine is based upon two factors: the perceived role of women in Anglo Saxon society and the later persecution of witches. That women were involved in health care is beyond question for women would have been the prime carers of the young, the elderly, and the sick and would assist other women in matters concerning pregnancy and childbirth. ‘Female healing practices constituted less a professional speciality than an inseparable part of everyday domestic duties and participation in the community of women’ 55.

The public’s perception of a woman’s role in society appears to be largely influenced by Victorian ideals and there is an assumption of historical progression with regard to women’s role in society, the implication being that the further back in time one travels the greater the social restrictions upon women. However, Fell points out that ‘the Norman Conquest ... is almost instantly followed by the impact of Gregorian reform ... (and) the combination of the new military based civil law and the increasing effectiveness of anti-female canon law produced a society in which the role of women was very sharply differentiated from that in the pre-1066 era.’ 56. Married Anglo Saxon women

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52 Watkins
53 Porter, 1999, p.107
54 Grell, 2004, p.85
55 Weston, 1995, p.281
56 Fell, 1984, p.14
enjoyed a certain degree of financial independence and this is evidenced by the *morgengifu* or morning gift which the husband would pay to the wife upon marriage and which belonged to the woman alone and was hers to control and bequeath. In addition, Fell notes that ‘finances are held to be the property of husband and wife’\textsuperscript{57} and that ‘in the laws the woman’s independence is recognised, and there is no suggestion that her finances were under masculine control, or that their goods were held in common’\textsuperscript{58}.

It has been suggested that ‘professional’ leeches were probably male, partly because the surviving male names of Anglo Saxon leeches, being Oxa, Dun and Bald. Crawford notes that the *Prognostications* suggests female leeches were known; ‘the twenty-second moon is good for buying servants. A child born on it will be a læce. A girl likewise. And poor’\textsuperscript{59}. The question of whether a woman could be a ‘professional’ leech as opposed to some who voluntarily helped within her community I think rests upon whether she received specialist training and whether she would charge for her services as part of her livelihood. As already discussed, university training post-dates our period and specialist training was likely to have taken place either in an ecclesiastical setting or as a secular apprenticeship and there is no reason to suppose that either route would have been unavailable to a potential female leech. It is possible that a female leech would pass her knowledge onto her daughter, in keeping with the older oral tradition of Anglo Saxon society. Many remedies pertaining to exclusively feminine ailments were likely to have been passed on orally within the female community and Weston raises the question of how female related medical knowledge entered the *Lacnunga* – perhaps through a female scribe or within a double monastery setting where the knowledge of female leeches could be accessed\textsuperscript{60}. As to whether a female leech would charge for her services and therefore be engaged in a profession, if a women could rightfully hold money or property either solely or jointly with her husband, there is nothing to suggest that she could not engage in a profession to earn money. Fell also makes the point that ‘it is also fairly clear that attitudes to women were more stringently dominated by their class than their sex’\textsuperscript{61}. A greater restriction on the ability of a woman to engage in a profession was likely to be her domestic duties relating to marriage and child-rearing and this would perhaps make the male professional leeches more numerous but does not indicate that a female professional leech could not, in reality, exist.

It is evident from the medical texts that using plants or ‘magic’ for remedies does not imply witchcraft (not even of the ‘white’ sort) and that ‘the word *wiccan* ‘witches’ has shifted its semantic field, acquiring new meanings and association, in the thousand years between us and its first recorded users’\textsuperscript{62}. That witches were known in Anglo Saxon society is beyond doubt. In the Law Treaty of *Edward and Guthrum* (ch. 11) and the law codes of *6 Athelred* (ch.7) and *2 Cnut* (ch.4) witches and wizards are listed along with ‘perjurers or murderers or impure, corrupt, notorious whores’ who should be driven out or allowed to perish unless they atone\textsuperscript{63}. Similarly, an 11\textsuperscript{th} century moralist declared ‘if witches or sorcerers, adulterers or prostitutes, murderers or perjurers are discovered in this land, they are to be driven from this country and the people cleansed…’\textsuperscript{64}. However, one must be careful not to apply later semantic developments in the word *wiccean* which, as Fell points out, probably referred to both male and female witches\textsuperscript{65}. There are only five surviving case studies of Anglo Saxon female witches, four of which are ‘mere literary

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p.57  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p.59  
\textsuperscript{59} Crawford, 2009, p.190  
\textsuperscript{60} Weston, 1995, p.282  
\textsuperscript{61} Fell, 1984, p.66  
\textsuperscript{62} Pollington, 2008, p.55-6  
\textsuperscript{63} Griffiths, 2006, p.100  
\textsuperscript{64} Fell, 1984, p.66  
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., p.32-3
The fifth case took place in 948AD and concerned the alleged use of morð or effigy into which had been driven iron nails.

**Additional Role of Leeches**

Remedies in the Lacnunga indicate that the role of the leech would not have been limited to providing medical support to the human population. Remedies 14 through to 145, 161, 163, 164 and 176 relate to illnesses in cattle, pigs, sheep and horses. Remedy 146 is a charm against thefts whilst no. 158 assists in the recovery of lost cattle. Remedies 191 and 192 are blessings for plants and those who eat them.

**Anglo Saxon Concepts of the Causes of Disease**

Pollington describes the Anglo Saxon concepts for the causes of disease can be divided into three ideas:

**Invasion of the Body by an outside force.**

This could be flying venom (Fleogende attor) which probably referred to what we would now term infectious disease, or elfshot, being the firing of darts by elves that were believed to be the cause of sudden pain.

**Something belonging to the body being lost or stolen.**

The OE word hal means general prosperity, well-being and good health and the words ‘whole’ and ‘hale’ derive from it. Hælu was the force which kept people well, whilst unhælu is a negative health which could be the lack of positive health and the presence of negative health. Negative health could be expelled by an emetic whilst salves could restore the body’s boundaries to seal hælu in and repell unhælu.

**A disturbance in the balance of the body.**

Poisons would disturb the balance of the body. Such poison could come from the contamination of materials and some remedies specify the use of clean materials suggesting Anglo Saxons were aware of the perils of using contaminated materials. God was said to send disease to purge the body of sin through suffering. Emetics or spiw- drencs could be prescribed to expel the contamination.

**Insight into Common Ailments**

Archaeological evidence for the state of the health of our Anglo Saxon ancestors is largely limited to human remains. Grave evidence from the Anglo Saxon period reveals a short life expectancy of, on average, 25-30 years, along with high infant mortality and women dying young – sometimes in childbirth. Also in evidence is the frequency of bone and joint disease, including rheumatoid arthritis, rickets, osteoarthritis, vertebral degeneration and a high incidence of chronic sinusitis. To supplement this evidence one can examine those ailments for which there are the greatest number of recorded remedies, the rationale being that the more common the ailment, the more numerous the remedy. An examination of the Lacnunga and Bald III reveals that the most common complaints were likely to have been headaches, eye complaints, wenns (tumours), worms, coughs and lung

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66 Pollington, 2008, p.56
67 Crawford, 2009, p.74
complaints, skin complaints, swellings and inflammations, and ailments relating to the digestive tract.

**Headaches**

Headaches can be caused by a variety of factors including stress, fatigue, eye strain, female hormonal changes and alcohol. Eye strain could result from working in poorly lit conditions whilst fatigue would be an inevitable part of the physically strenuous Anglo Saxon lifestyle. Headaches and facial pain also result from sinusitis and the headache remedy described in Lacnunga no.3 which aims to expel pus from the nose is likely to relate to sinusitis.

**Eye Complaints**

Eye ailments appear to have been common, as anyone who has cooked or has sat around a wood fire will appreciate! Sore eyes from smoke, foreign bodies entering the eye or general deterioration of sight would have been common. A diet poor in vitamin A (available in dairy products, eggs, oily fish and liver) could result in blindness. The large number of remedies for eye complaints probably also reflects the potentially devastating effect impaired sight would have had on the ability to provide for oneself and one’s family.

**Wenns**

‘Wenn’ is the Old English word for a swelling or tumour. Swellings or tumours can result from a wide variety of conditions, from infection to injury to cancer.

**Coughs/Lung Complaints**

A variety of viral and bacterial infections could result in coughs and lung complaints. As with eye complaints, working over and around an open fire could cause significant irritation.

**Worms**

If the number of remedies for worms is anything to go by, it would appear that intestinal worms in humans were widespread and Hagen comments that ‘it seems likely that most people carried worm burdens for most of their lives’\(^{68}\).

**Whip Worms:**
(Trichuris trichiura)

Evidence of Whipworm infestation was found at West Stow and Anglo Scandinavian York\(^{69}\). Whip worms live in the large intestine and an infestation can result in diarrhoea, vomiting, anaemia, and abdominal pain. Whipworms spread through faecal matter contaminating water and food\(^{70}\).

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\(^{68}\) Hagen, 2006, p.448  
\(^{69}\) Ibid., p.448  
\(^{70}\) Martin (ed.), 2008, p.537
Sheep Liver Fluke:
(Fasciola hepatica)

Fascioliasis is the infestation of the bile ducts and liver by the Sheep Liver Fluke\(^71\) which would have entered the human diet from sheep via water supplies shared by sheep and humans and the consumption of plants harvested from contaminated water sources. Symptoms would include Cirrhosis, vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal rigidity\(^72\).

Maw Worm:
(Ascaris lumbricoides)

Ascariasis is the infestation of the intestinal tract by Maw worm which is spread via contaminated faeces. The larvae hatch in the intestines and migrate to the liver, lungs, heart, windpipe and pharynx via the hepatic portal vein. Symptoms include abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, appendicitis and peritonitis. Migrating larvae in the lungs can also cause pneumonia.\(^73\) Evidence for Maw Worm infestation in humans was also found in Scandinavian York\(^74\) and Today it is the most common type of human intestinal worm.

Skin Complaints

Remedies for ‘sudden eruptions’ indicate that skin complaints were common, suggesting a dietary deficiency in vitamin C and Niacin

Inflammation

Inflammation can occur where there is any damage to cells and it may have been considered to differ from Wenns by being a general swelling rather than a localised protuberance, but this is unclear. Such cell damage may be caused by physical injury, infection, and restricted blood supply leading to dead tissue, allergies or a reaction to a chemical such as venom. Inflammation is caused by the body increasing blood supply to the injured area to effect repair but which also compresses nerves and causes pain.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., p.178  
\(^{72}\) Cameron, 1993, p.10  
\(^{73}\) Martin (ed.), 2008, p.37  
\(^{74}\) Hagen, 2006, p.448
Complaints of the Digestive Tract

In addition to the parasitic worms listed above which would in themselves cause symptoms such as stomach pain and griping, the following ailments are also likely to have been common.

Diarrhoea:

Diarrhoea results from damage to the gut lining caused by bacterial or viral infection which inhibits water absorption. Bacterial infection can also cause the gut to secrete additional fluids and may result from contaminated water or food poisoning. There are numerous remedies for diarrhoea which is perhaps unsurprising when one considers the advice given in the dialogues of Solomon and Saturn (10th to 11th century) which state:

*When a morsel of food slips from (the plate of) some wise man, and he locates it (on the floor) in the light, he bends down after it, signs it (with a cross) and seasons it and eats it himself.*

Likewise, in the 10th century Confessional of pseudo-Egbert it is recommended that

*If some mouse or weasel fall into a large (vessel of) liquid, and is (discovered) there dead, sprinkle on some holy water and consume it (as normal).*

Food hygiene appears to have been reliant on Christian magic to a certain extent.

Dysentery:

This is an infection of the intestinal tract that results in severe diarrhoea containing blood and mucus. Amoebic Dysentery is caused by the parasitic invasion of the colon by *Entamoeba histolytica* and can be spread via cysts in infected faeces that find their way into the digestive tract via the mouth through lack of hygiene and contaminated water sources. Symptoms include stomach pain, diarrhoea, vomiting and fever. It is not hard to imagine that in an Anglo Saxon community where sanitation and hygiene was lacking once Dysentery had infected the community it would be difficult to eradicate as without treatment the amoeba can live in the colon for months or even years without necessarily producing symptoms throughout that period.

Haemorrhoids:

The Anglo Saxon term for haemorrhoids is the ‘bleeding fig’ which I think reflects their fundamentally poetic soul! Otherwise known as ‘piles’, this is the enlargement of the blood filled tissue in the wall of the anus and can cause itching, pain and bleeding when passing stools. Piles can result from constipation or diarrhoea, pregnancy or sitting for prolonged periods.

Joint, Limb and Foot Complaints

Considering the physically strenuous way of life most Anglo Saxons would have led, it is unsurprising that both the grave evidence and the number of leechdoms indicate a prevalence of limb, joint and foot ailments. Osteoarthritis is a degenerative disease of the joints caused by wear of cartilage, resulting in joints that become stiff, painful, and have limited movement.

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75 Griffiths, 2006, p.57
76 Griffiths, 2006, p.
77 Martin (ed.), 2008, p.146
78 Ibid, p.217
79 Ibid, p.356
Rheumatoid arthritis is a disease of the synovial lining of the joints. Such conditions would have been aggravated by lifestyle causing the suffering to seek relief. Grave evidence of Rickets (bones which do not harden in childhood) indicates vitamin D or Calcium deficiencies in children and this condition would have been painful.

**Anaemia**

Anaemia is the reduction in the quantity of haemoglobin in the blood which limits the amount of oxygen the blood can carry. How prevalent anaemia was during the Anglo Saxon period is difficult to assess and levels would largely depend on individual group’s red meat consumption, for whilst it is true that iron is available in dark green vegetables, only 5% of this can be absorbed by the body. Symptoms of anaemia can include headache, chest pains, vomiting, muscle pain (ache in the limbs?) and fever all of which occur in Old English medical texts, as well as dryness of the mouth and throat which may account for the remedies for continuous thirst. Menstruating and pregnant women would be at particular risk and Malaria could be passed onto an unborn child from the mother. Anaemia in any individual would be further compounded by infection of Tertian Malaria, ‘Lencten Adl’ (spring ailment), which would have been endemic in marshy environments, the habitat of the mosquito vector. Symptoms of Malaria also include shivering, fever, sweating and an enlarged spleen resulting from the breakdown of red blood cells. One remedy for an enlarged spleen was plunging a hot iron into wine and then drinking the wine which would now contain additional iron. Hagen notes that cooking acidic foods in an iron cauldron could increase the iron content of the food by a factor of 30 to 100. At the very least anaemia would lessen the ability to undertake physical activity or to keep oneself warm in cold weather.

**The Role of the Church**

The Church’s involvement in Anglo Saxon medicine was significant and monasteries were repositories for learning and texts as well as the centre for the production of medical texts. St Hilda’s double monastery at Whitby (7th century) had a building that acted as an infirmary, whilst the site of a nunnery at Nazeingby in Northamptonshire is associated with a cemetery with ‘high levels of pathology and an unusual proportion of burials (that) had reached old age’, perhaps suggesting care of the sick and elderly. The Benedictine rule states ‘the care of the sick is to be placed above and before every other duty, as if indeed Christ were being directly served by waiting on them’, although Pollington suggests that this was mostly confined to fellow monastic inmates as opposed to the central medical role played by religious houses later in the Medieval period. Some remedies require the saying of a Paternoster or the application of holy water which would require the assistance of a cleric. One remedy says that ‘and a mass priest shall perform the leechdom if a man hath means to get one’ (my emphasis), suggesting that medical assistance from a priest might be expensive.

Ælfric’s *Homily on St Bartholomew Day* highlights the contradictions in church teaching and in the medical practices recorded in the surviving medical texts which, after all, were likely to have been written in a monastic setting.

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80 Ibid, p.434
81 Ibid, p.435
82 Ibid, p.21
83 Hagen, 2006, p.460
84 Crawford, 2009, p.188-9
85 Porter, 1999, p.111
86 Griffiths, 2006, p.59
He who is infirm, let him pray to his Lord for his healing, and patiently endure the pangs ... It is not allowed to any Christian person that he should acquire his healing at any stone, nor at any tree – unless it be the holy cross – nor at any place – unless it be the holy house of God – he who does otherwise, he definitely undertakes idolatry ... Augustine the wise said that it is however safe that one should eat healing plants, but that he accounts it as an impermissible act if wizardry if someone should tie the plants onto himself, unless he lays them directly onto the wound ... No person must enchant plants with spells, but must bless them with God’s words and eat them so.  

Pollington suggests that the practice of tying plants to a patient or saying words over them were mentioned specifically because they were probably commonplace. That these remedies were compiled in a monastic setting supports Nokes' view that 'leeches ... rather than being secretive practitioners of hedge magic or herbal lore, trying to stay out of view of the church ... operated openly and in collusion with the church ...'

My Character

At present my persona is that of a late Anglo Saxon leech who has acquired her knowledge from her mother and descends from a line of leeches. My own daughter or the daughter of another member of the group often represents my Anglo Saxon daughter/apprentice, reflecting one interpretation of how medical knowledge may have been transmitted. I explain that my character gained the favour of her Lord by curing his son of Lencten Adl and thus gained the trust of other members of his household, increasing income and enabling me to buy some expensive ingredients which only serve to enhance my reputation. My persona has not acquired her knowledge in an ecclesiastical or ‘learned’ setting and I therefore only demonstrate remedies from Bald III and the Lacnunga on the

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Pollington, 2008, p.32-3
Ibid., p.33
Nokes, 2004, p.74
basis that my knowledge of Mediterranean sources would have been non-existent and these texts appear to most closely represent northern tradition medicine. However, the public have shown significant interest in the manuscript evidence and in order to better demonstrate how such texts may have been written I intend to produce my own book along the lines of the Lacnunga, a commonplace book that would include selected remedies and charms. This will not only enable me to show remedies written in Old English and give the public an idea of how such texts may have looked and how they were produced, a commonplace book will also act as an aide memoire for the longer charms and more complex remedies. My persona will need to be adapted to enable me to read and I am currently researching my back story.

**My Display**

The best advice anyone ever gave me when I began leechcraft was to ensure that my display didn’t end up looking like a collection of dried twigs and leaves! To avoid this I use a combination of fresh and dried herbs, as well as spices and more unusual materials such as myrrh. I also endeavour to make my display interesting for children and my display table is low so they can see and interact with the display easily. To this end I also include ‘disgusting’ materials such as theatrical blood to represent mouse blood (Bald III, no.25), real goose manure (Bald III, no.45), and apple juice to represent child’s and dog’s urine (Bald III, no.25 and Bald III, no.2). I have also taken worms in a pot of soil which I keep damp for the repair of cut sinews (Bald III, no.34) and I hang a deer’s leg by my display that I obtained from a local butcher (Lacnunga, no.8).
I also use a variety of containers to add interest. The pottery pictured I make myself and is based on the Ipswich and Thetford Ware that is local to me. I have collected cockle and scallop shells which hold small quantities of materials effectively. Finding authentic glassware for display has proved difficult as I have been unable to find an archaeological example to suit my late Anglo-Saxon persona. Small wooden bowls with small bone or wooden spoons have proved useful for mixing remedies, along with a pestle and mortar for crushing seeds. They have the added advantage of being useful for passing certain remedies and ingredients to the public for them to smell. I keep my dried materials in small linen bags that I have made or bought from DARF and I store all my materials in an oak chest which my husband constructed using hinges from Daegrad (see Suppliers).
I use a set of scales and pennies to weigh materials. The pennies are from Daegrad and the scales are a 19th century set which I bought cheaply from eBay and adapted to replicate finds discussed in *Late Saxon Balances and Weights from England* (see ‘Useful Links’). My display always includes both rational and magical remedies to reflect this combination in Anglo Saxon medicine.

**Healer’s Knife**

A knife appears in the *Wið Förstice* charm as a vital element to the remedy. It is my view that the leech’s knife would have been an important, prized and personal tool, used in the harvesting, preparing and sometimes the application of medicinal materials. For my own knife I have used a blade shape taken from *The Products of the Blacksmith in mid-late Anglo Saxon England* (see ‘Useful Links’) and an antler handle, inspired by the *Wið Förstice* charm. The decoration on the knife includes the weasel symbol of our group, Christian crosses and two carved faces that could be interpreted as Christian or otherwise – a reflection of the religious ambiguity of the charms.
Health and Safety

Whatever your own personal opinion on the potential efficacy of the remedies you demonstrate or discuss with the public, or even if you are a qualified medical practitioner of any sort, it is vital that you remember you are NOT at a show to provide medical advice or to promote remedies for use by the public. It is to be stressed to the public that you are demonstrating a particular element of Anglo Saxon history and that you are NOT endorsing the use of such remedies.

Many of the ingredients used in the texts have the potential to be harmful, from mild skin irritation to miscarriage and death. As a reenactor it is your responsibility to ensure that you research your ingredients carefully and do not bring anything to shows that may constitute a danger to members of the public or to other reenactors. It would be the work of a moment for a young child to put an ingredient in his or her mouth and this should do no more than provide an unpleasant taste. Any potential risks should also be listed in the Risk Assessment along with the precautions taken. At the end of this document is a list of some potentially dangerous ingredients that should be avoided. This list is not definitive and many materials can promote reactions ranging from the mildly annoying to the deadly. The leech reenactor should satisfy themselves as to the safety of all ingredients used.

Dangerous Materials

Aconite
Black Hellebore helleborus niger
Bryony bryonia dioica
Campion Seeds melanandrium album
Corn Cockle Seeds
Marsh Crowfoot ranunculus scleratus
Daffodil Bulbs narcissus pseudo-narcissus
Everlasting mercurialis perennis
Foxglove digitalis purpurea
Hellebore veratrum album
Hemlock conium maculatum
Henbane hyoscamus niger
Holly Berries ilex aquifolium
Mandrake mandragora officinarum
Deadly Nightshade atropa belladonna
Peony paeonia officinalis
Savine juniperus Sabina
Thorn-Apple datura stramonium
## Key Old English Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attor</th>
<th>Poison</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bealocræft</td>
<td>Evil art</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bean</td>
<td>Bean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blastma</td>
<td>Blossom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bryððenu</td>
<td>Midwife</td>
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<tr>
<td>Galdor</td>
<td>Charm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Galdor-craeft</td>
<td>Skill at enchanting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hal</td>
<td>well-being / prosperity / good health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hælan</td>
<td>make whole</td>
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<tr>
<td>Halig</td>
<td>Holy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Healsboc</td>
<td>Neck-book (possibly a written charm hung around the neck)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Læce</td>
<td>A healer of any kind</td>
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<tr>
<td>Læcefeoh</td>
<td>Leech fee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Læcedom</td>
<td>Remedy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leaf</td>
<td>Leaf</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lybcræft</td>
<td>Skill in the use of drugs, magic or witchcraft.</td>
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<td>Lybesn</td>
<td>Amulet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lyfesn</td>
<td>Amulet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Onflyge</td>
<td>Infectious disease</td>
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<td>Sæd</td>
<td>Seed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scinn-craeft</td>
<td>Magic skill</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scinn-lac</td>
<td>Magical action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiw-drenc</td>
<td>Spew drink - emetic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tungolcraeft</td>
<td>Star skill.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unhælu</td>
<td>Negative health</td>
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<td>Wæstm</td>
<td>Fruit</td>
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<td>Weoda</td>
<td>Weed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wiccecræft</td>
<td>Witchery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wigle / wiglung</td>
<td>Divination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyrmas</td>
<td>Worms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyrta</td>
<td>Useful plant</td>
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<td>Wyrtgalstre</td>
<td>Plant charmer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ylfa</td>
<td>Elf</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ylfa gescot</td>
<td>Elf shot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ylfig</td>
<td>Insane</td>
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Useful Links

Late Saxon Balances and Weights from England:

The Products of the Blacksmith in mid-late Anglo Saxon England:
http://www.pjoarchaeology.co.uk/docs/14/anglosaxon-ironwork-part-2.pdf

Chirirgeons: The Staff of the Serpent Medical History
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Chirurgeons/

The Staff of the Serpent - History of Medicine Group for Living History and Re-enactment Medical Practitioners (Physicians, Leeches, Quacks, Surgeons, Sawbones, Apothecaries, Cunning Women Men, Midwives, Toothdrawers (Kindhearts), Bonesetters, Horse gelders, Bloodletters (Phlebotamists), Herbalists, Stillroom Mistresses etc). To swap good ideas, exchange equipment, names of manufacturers and to share research and sources. Open to living historians and re-enactors and those who are interested in medicine. We now have more than 300 members worldwide.

Suppliers

Daegrad – now trade solely on ebay under username bleath1066