

ANGLO-SAXON MEDICINE

A. J. Bliss M.A. (Oxon), B.Litt.

Among the Anglo-Saxons there were two distinct schools of medicine. The first was based on the traditional pagan lore of the Germanic tribes, brought over by the invaders from the Continent; it relied largely on sympathetic magic, and its remedies were accompanied by incantations and elaborate rituals. The second is derived from Latin translations of the early Greek physicians, and although its practice seems primitive enough from the modern standpoint, it is scientific in so far as the ailments treated are recognized as physical in origin, and the remedies prescribed make use of the physical properties of the substances used.

The traditional pagan medicine is known to us partly from a number of early *Charms*, mostly in verse, and partly from a collection of recipes known as the *Lacnunga* (prescriptions), which, though it is a late compilation, seems to preserve a good deal of early material. The Anglo-Saxons, of course, were nominally Christian from an early date, but there is ample evidence that a body of pagan superstition long survived under a veneer of Christianity; some of the surviving charms are still purely pagan in form, but others have been partially or completely christianized, and invoke the aid of Christ or the Saints instead of that of the Germanic divinities.

A characteristic charm is one which is designed to cure a pain in the side, perhaps what we now call a 'stitch'. The ointment prescribed is compounded of feverfew, red nettle and dock leaves boiled in butter; but the application of the remedy is to be accompanied by a long incantation in verse and a somewhat obscure ritual involving the use of an arrow, a knife, and a number of spears. The pain is attributed to the activity of witches, and the weapons are used for the counter-attack. It is evidently essential that both the source and

the site of the pain should be exactly named: so it is attributed in turn to gods, elves and witches, and located in turn in the skin, the flesh and the blood. Finally the pain is banished to the mountain-tops.

The neo-Greek school of medicine is known to us from a number of sources, all from the late tenth or early eleventh centuries. There are two systematic medical treatises, the *Leech-book* and a work known as *Peri Didaxeon*, in which the various diseases are treated according to the part of the body they affect. Two further treatises deal with the *materia medica*; the *Herbarium Apuleii*, attributed to Lucius Apuleius (better known as the author of *The Golden Ass*), but in fact based on a Latin translation of Dioscorides, deals with vegetable remedies; the *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* deals with animal remedies.

Few of the herbs mentioned in the recipes can now be identified with certainty. The English names have mostly passed out of use, and although Latin names are often given as well, the nomenclature of botany has changed so much since the Dark Ages that they are of little use. Not only the remedies but the diseases themselves are often hard to identify. What is meant, for instance, by 'dry-rot disease'? Perhaps tuberculosis, but there are many other possibilities. Equally obscure are such complaints as 'neck disease' (perhaps goitre) and 'disease in the jaw'. Because both the diseases themselves and the constituents of the remedies are doubtful, it is impossible to determine whether there is any empirical basis for the prescriptions.

An astonishing feature of the prescriptions, both vegetable and animal, is the wide serviceability of a single ingredient. A herb called *hostrigo*, for instance, will cure any kind of unpleasant growth, outbreak or swelling on any part of a man's body. Still more surprising are the uses to

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which the body of a fox can be put. An ointment made from a fox's fat will cure both headache and earache; broth from a fox's lung or liver cures pains in the spleen; an emulsion compounded from a fox's muscles cures sore jaws; the gall-bladder cures dimness of the eyes; and the whole carcase stewed cures rheumatism.

It may seem that the Anglo-Saxons were exceptionally superstitious and credulous; but it is well to remember that remedies no less curious than theirs were still current as recently as the seventeenth

century. John Aubrey quotes a method of curing the thrush: 'Take a living frog, and hold it in a cloth, that it does not go down into the child's mouth; and put the head into the child's mouth 'till it is dead; and then take another frog and do the same.' Or again, a cure for the tooth-ache: 'Take a new nail, and make the gum bleed with it, and then drive it into an oak. This did cure William Neal's son, a very stout gentleman, when he was almost mad with the pain, and had a mind to have pistolled himself.'