

Who were the physicians of Myddfai and what light do the extant medieval Welsh medical texts shed on medical beliefs in Wales? In your answer you should analyse a range of recipes and excerpts from the primary sources.

The history of the Physicians of Myddfai is told in what initially appears to be two very different ways. The Physicians appear in the well-known folktale of the Lady of The Lake.¹ In this story they are the three earthly sons of a fairy bride who emerged from the lake known as Llyn y Fan Fach, near to the village of Myddfai, Carmarthenshire. When they were grown men, their mother returned to live in the Otherworld but returned to visit the oldest son, meeting him at a place named the Physician's Gate. Here she instructed him to heal the sick, providing him with the knowledge to be able to do so.² These brothers then went on to become successful doctors known as the Physicians of Myddfai. A documented reference to a named family of Physicians appears in several extant medieval Welsh medical texts. The descriptions are factual in nature, and the men are described as being a father and his three sons, all of whom are doctors, that have connections to a Carmarthenshire Lord and his courts.³

The first part of this essay will look at the way that the Physicians of Myddfai have been portrayed in Welsh folklore tradition in contrast to the way in which they are documented in extant Welsh medieval manuscripts and the possible reasons for this duality. The second part of this essay will describe the key medical beliefs in medieval Wales, as documented in the extant manuscripts, and how these beliefs were used in the diagnosis and treatment of illness. The four key manuscripts (in translation where required) that have been used to compile this essay are as follows: British Library Additional 14912 (BLAdd)⁴, Cardiff 3.242 (Hafod 16, Card)⁵, Oxford Bodleian Rawlinson B467 (Rawl)⁶, Oxford Jesus College 111 (the Red Book of Hergest, RBH).⁷ Plus, two secondary manuscripts, Oxford Jesus College MS. 22⁸ and National Library of Wales Sotheby MS C2⁹.

The story of the Lady of the Lake first appears in print in 1861 in the introduction to *The Physicians of Myddvai* edited by the Rev John Williams, 'ab Ithel', and translated by John Pughe.¹⁰ In the book it explains that the story tells of the origin of the Physicians of Myddfai and is translated from the oral recitations taken by William Rees of Tonn (near

¹ Gwyn, Jones, 'The Woman of Llyn y Fan' in *Welsh Legends and Folk Tales* (London, Puffin Books, 1955), p 208 – 222.

² Ibid. p 208 – 222.

³ M.E., Owen, Meddygon Myddfai: A Preliminary Survey of Some Medical Writings in Wales, *Studia Celtica* vol X/XI, 1975, p 215.

⁴ British Library, Collection of Welsh Manuscripts, Add MS 14912, MEDDYGON MYDDFAI, or the Practice of Physic of the Myddvai Doctors

⁵ Cardiff, Cardiff Central Library, 3.242 (Hafod 16), Medical, Scientific and Practical Texts, Religious Texts

⁶ Oxford, Bodleian Rawlins Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson Collection, MS. Rawl. B. 467, Medieval Welsh Medical Texts

⁷ Oxford, Bodleian Library (on behalf of Jesus College), MS 111, Medieval Middle Welsh prose and poetry

⁸ Oxford, Bodleian Library (on behalf of Jesus College), MS 22, Medieval Middle Welsh medical texts

⁹ Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Sotheby, MS C2, Medieval Welsh medical texts and prose.

¹⁰ *The Physicians of Myddvai*, ed. by Rev. John Williams, trans. by John Pughe (Llandovery, D. J. Roderic, 1861), pp. xxi – xxx.

Llandovery, Carmarthenshire) from three natives of Myddfai. Further acknowledgement is given to J. Joseph, Esq. F.S.A. Brecon, who collected further material related to the story from the old inhabitants of the Parish of Llanddeusant. This collecting and documenting of the story from local people points to the story being well-established in their oral history. The printed version is in English with the key parts of the story's dialog also included in Welsh helping to preserve some of the original feel for the legend. The story describes how the young son of a poor widow living at Blaensawdde farm was watching over cattle grazing near the lake known as 'Llyn y Fan Fach' when he noticed a beautiful woman sitting on top of the water. The youth was very much taken by the woman's beauty and offered her some bread. She declined saying that the bread was too hard before disappearing into the water. The following day the lady was again sitting on the water and again the youth offered her some bread. This time she declined again saying that it was too soft before disappearing once more into the water. On the third day the woman accepted the bread and agreed to marry the youth but there was one condition attached to the marriage. If the youth should strike her three times, she would leave him forever. Yet again she disappeared into the water, and, after a short amount of time, a man emerged from the water with two beautiful girls that looked very alike. The man asked the youth to identify which of the girls was the one that he wanted to marry and sensing the youth's confusion the girl that had accepted his offer of marriage moved her foot slightly so that he would know it was her. The man, who was the girl's father, said that he would give her a dowry of cattle, sheep and goats the number of which was determined by how many the girl could count of each in just one breath. She counted rapidly in fives, and the corresponding number of each type of animal appeared from the lake. The young couple had a happy marriage living at the farm known as Esgair Llaethdy in Myddfai where they raised three sons. All was well until the husband struck his wife three times, the first on the day of a local christening, the second at a wedding when the wife oddly cried at such a happy event and the third at a funeral when the wife inappropriately laughed out loud. With each blow, the wife had reminded her husband of his pre-marriage promise not to hit her. On the third occasion she told him that the marriage was over and returned to Esgair Llaethdy calling the cattle and other animals by their names in a long list. Even the small black calf that had been freshly slaughtered got down from a hook and joined the other animals and the woman as they all disappeared back into the lake. After some time had passed (how long is not stated in the story), the Lady of the Lake returned several times to meet with her sons. The first time was with her eldest son, Rhiwallon, telling him that he was to heal the sick and giving him a bag of medicinal remedies. Later, she met with all three of her sons showing them where to find plants with medicinal properties setting on the path to become successful doctors, the Physicians of Myddfai.

The story reads like a typical folktale containing several motifs that are commonly found in Welsh folklore and can be identified using the list of motifs documented by Juliette Wood, in a journal article for *Folklore*.¹¹ These themes or motifs are:

- I – A young man meets a fairy who has the appearance of a beautiful woman near a lake and offers her three types of bread
- II – The woman agrees to marry the young man on the condition that he will not quarrel with or hit her three times
- III – The woman comes with a dowry of cattle which enable the married couple to have children and prosper. Everything goes well within the marriage until the husband breaks the condition on which the fairy agreed to marry and at this point, she returns to the lake
- IV – The woman later returns to visit her children bestowing on them a knowledge of medicine

In his book, *A Welsh Lake Legend and The Famous Physicians of Myddfai*, Robin Gwyndaf also describes the legend as an example of the 'Fairy Water-Bride' motif and highlights the written form of the tale as echoing the art of oral storytelling in its structure, form, patterns and rhythms.¹² Gwyndaf also picks out the use of 'formulaic numbers' in the story, especially the groupings of three, such as the three days on which the youth on which the youth meets the woman at the lake, the three different types of bread, the marriage contract being based on the condition that the youth will not hit her three times, the birth of three sons, the three significant life events of birth, marriage and death.¹³ The use of such numeric formula is common to the oral storytelling tradition and was aimed to aid the storyteller recall the story and to help guide the audience through the tale. It is important, for reasons to be explained, that the story as it appears in *Physicians of Myddvai* is accepted as coming from a much older oral tradition and not something that was created specifically for the book.¹⁴ The use of oral recollections, the form and structure, and the way in which it uses identifiable folkloric themes throughout, adds weight to this being true.

Before looking at the references to the Physicians of Myddfai in the medieval manuscripts, it is important to understand something about each of the four key manuscripts used for this essay and how they relate to each other. According to Dianna Luft, in her book *Welsh Medieval Texts Volume One: The Recipes*, these manuscripts can be considered contemporary and date from the late fourteenth century or the start of the fifteenth century.¹⁵ Luft observes that there has been an historical tendency by scholars

¹¹ Juliette, Wood, 'The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales', *Folklore*, vol. 103, no. 1, 1992, pp. 56–72. doi:10.1080/0015587X.1992.9715829

¹² Robin, Gwyndaf, *A Welsh Lake Legend and the Famous Physicians of Myddfai*, *Béaloideas*, vol. 60/61, 1992, p. 246, doi: 10.2307/20522409.

¹³ Ibid. p. 246.

¹⁴ *The Physicians of Myddvai*, ed. by Williams, trans. by Pughe, pp. xxi – xxx.

¹⁵ Diana, Luft, *Medieval Welsh Medical Texts: Volume One: The Recipes*, 1st ed., (University of Wales Press, 2020), p. 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.14491544>. [Accessed 20 Dec. 2025]

to approach the texts contained in the manuscripts as a single source of material, one single text known as *Meddygon Myddfai* ('The Physicians of Myddfai') and that Morfydd Owen has shown that it is incorrect to do so.¹⁶ However, the manuscripts have a lot in common as they all draw on the same source material, with this material being almost always common across each of the manuscripts.¹⁷ One result of scholars grouping together texts and treating them as a single source, is that material has been incorrectly attributed to the Physicians of Myddfai. Luft provides an example of this where she cites the work of Pol Diverres, *Le Plus Ancien Texts des Myddygon Muddvai*.¹⁸ Luft explains this error, saying that Diverres incorrectly ascribed all the medical texts in the Red Book of Hergest to the Physicians when he failed to understand that the colophon which names the doctors only applies to that specific collection and not to all subsequent medical texts.¹⁹ This incorrect attribution to the Physicians may have artificially inflated their importance in medieval Welsh medicine for later scholars. Doctors appear to have held a respected position in Medieval Wales according to M. E. Owen who states, 'The evidence of the law books suggests that there was in Wales a class of practical doctor some of whom were sponsored by the Prince's Court...'.²⁰ In fact, the Early Welsh Law Books (Cyfraith Hywel) contains a clearly defined reference to 'the court doctor' (meddyg y llys) who was granted certain rights and status within the royal household and was allowed to charge a fee for their services.²¹ M. E. Owen, in *The Medical Books of Medieval Wales and the Physicians of Myddfai*, identifies two colophons from the key manuscripts which specifically related to (i) named doctors and (ii) links the named doctors with the court of a Lord Rhys:

(1) This book was put together from the various books of the Physicians and mediciners, such books as have been proved to be correct, namely Cadwgan, Gruffudd and Einion. This rule should be known generally to every doctor and to be kept by him for fear that he fail in his craft like a blind man and bring the sick man to an end through his error and ignorance.²²

(2) Here with the help of God the almighty Lord, are shown the most important and essential remedies for man's body. And those who caused them to be written down in this manner were Rhiwallon, the doctor, and his sons, Cadwgan, Gruffudd, and Einion; for they were the best and leading doctors of their time and of the time of Rhys Gryg, their lord and Lord of Dinefwr, the man who safeguarded

¹⁶ Ibid. P.9.

¹⁷ Ibid. P.9.

¹⁸ P., Diverres and Aberystwyth former location United Theological College, *Le plus ancien texte des Meddygon Myddveu* (Maurice le Dault, 1913)

¹⁹ Luft, *Medieval Welsh*, pp. 4.

²⁰ Owen *Studia Celtica* 10-11 1975

²¹ John, Cule, 'The Court Mediciner and Medicine in the Laws of Wales', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, vol 21, no. 3, 1966, pp. 213-235, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24621580>>, [access 19 Dec. 2025].

²² Owen, M.E., *The Medical Books of Medieval Wales and the Physicians of Myddfai*, The Carmarthen Antiquary vol XXX1, 1995, pp. 41-42.

their status and privilege completely and honourably as was their due. And the reason they caused the rules of their art to be written down this way was lest there be no one who knew them as well as they did after their days.²³

It should be noted that other colophons exist in the manuscript which reference doctors in general, but these appear without any names.²⁴ Owen continues by linking the named doctors with the area of Myddfai using two key pieces of information. Firstly, the fact that princes of Wales had court doctors (see comment above on the Early Welsh Law Books) and secondly because of the post Anglo-Norman invasion dues paid to the Lordship of Llanymddyfri (a town near to Myddfai) which were described as ‘an unusual due of service, namely that the ten free tenants of the Maenor of Myddfai were obliged to supply to the lord of Llanymddyfri with a doctor to follow him in Wales at his expense.’²⁵ It would therefore seem logical to conclude that the lands in Myddfai were inhabited by some type of lay physician who were the descendants of the earlier court physicians called Rhiwallon, Cadwgan, Gruffudd, and Einion.

The essay has looked in depth at the two very different depictions of the Physicians of Myddfai, one based on folklore and the other linked to the court of Rhys Gryg. The next step is to try and find an explanation for this complete contrast and how it may have come about, the 1861 publication of *The Physicians of Myddvai* edited by the Rev John Williams, ‘ab Ithel’, may hold the key and therefore requires further investigation. It is reasonable to assume that the book contains what could be described as a hidden agenda, or more kindly put, a degree of bias as it was published during the Welsh Cultural Revival, for the Welsh MSS Society that:

Has been formed for the purpose of transcribing and printing the more important of the numerous Bardic and Historical Remains of Wales, still extant in the Principality, and other parts of the world, that have hitherto been allowed to continue in a state of obscurity, without any effective measures being adopted to lay their contents before the public, and secure them from the various accidents to which they are liable.²⁶

On face value, this would seem to be a very honourable objective but there were those, such as Iolo Morganwg, who were not averse to falsifying documents both for their own

²³ Ibid. pp. 41-42.

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 41-42.

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 42-43.

²⁶ *The Physicians of Myddvai*, ed. by Williams, trans. by Pughe, pp. v.

personal gain and to portray Wales and her history in a better light, as illustrated in the next paragraph.²⁷

In *Meddygon Myddfai: A Preliminary Survey of Some Medieval Medical Writing in Welsh*, Morfydd Owen considered the possibility that the story of the Lady of the Lake in the form outlined earlier in this essay arose when two separate folktales became merged.²⁸ This theory is based on the 1880 book '*British Goblin*' by Wirt Sikes in which Sikes records three versions of the story.²⁹ In Sikes' second version of the story, there is no mention of the Physicians of Myddfai and, for this reason, Owen proposes that the story of the Lady of the Lake was once a story in its own right and it was joined at some point with another local onomastic story that was based on nearby place-names that had a 'medical reference'. At this point the motif of gifted descendants created a link between the two stories forever joining the Lady of the Lake with the Physicians of Myddfai. It is possible that this blending of two stories happened when the content for *The Physicians of Myddvai* was being prepared, either with or without the knowledge of ab Ithel.³⁰ As Owen further states, she has been unable to find anything that links the physicians of Myddfai with the story of the Lady of the Lake prior to 1861.³¹ This is a situation that Gwyndaf calls '...an interesting example of the interaction of tradition and history'.³² The veracity of *The Physicians of Myddvai* is further highlighted by Luff, specifically the second of two texts contained in the volume, a medical compendium that is attributed to "Hywel Feddyg" and based on a copy of a manuscript that was gifted to ab Ithel by the very well-known forger Iolo Morganwg (aka. Edward Williams, 1747-1826) and that had been modified by Morganwg to make the text appear older and more authentic (including replacing most of the English wording with Welsh) with added notes which claim to link the text to decedents of the Physicians of Myddfai.³³

As Owen was unable to find anything that links the physicians of Myddfai with the story of the Lady of the Lake prior to 1861, it could be concluded that this merging of the two stories was made specifically for the book and in doing so it further created a link to the medieval court physicians of Rhys Gryg, possibly to enhance the status of the story or to make it more interesting or intriguing.³⁴ But in doing so it caused a confusion as to why court physicians were being portrayed as the descendants of a fairy woman.

²⁷ Dictionary of Welsh Biography, 'WILLIAMS, EDWARD', <<https://biography.wales/article/s-WILL-EDW-1747#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&manifest=https%3A%2F%2Fdamssl.llgc.org.uk%2Fiiif%2F2.0%2F4672175%2Fmanifest.json&xywh=1184%2C775%2C1567%2C1290>>, [accessed online 17 Dec. 2025]

²⁸ Owen, *Meddygon Myddfai*, p. 210.

²⁹ Wirt, Sikes, *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-Lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions*, (London, Sampson and Low, 1880), pp. 38-48.

³⁰ *The Physicians of Myddvai*, ed. by Williams, trans. by Pughe, pp. xxi – xxx.

³¹ Owen, *Meddygon Myddfai*, p. 213.

³² Gwyndaf, *A Welsh Lake*, p. 246.

³³ Luff, *Medieval Welsh*, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ Owen, *Meddygon Myddfai*, p. 213.

All medieval European medical literature and learning originated from one of two classical sources. The first stream came from Western Europe, initially in Greek in the fourth century before being translated into Latin in the sixth century which were in the form of short treatises mostly on topics such as diets, fever, pule, urine, prognostics, pharmacology and bloodletting, all of which are found in the Physicians of Myddfai tractates.³⁵ The second stream of literature arrive in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from Arabia via the medical school at Salerno and via Spain. It is from this stream that Aristotle writes to Alexander on Hygiene and Physiognomy.³⁶ Examples from both streams can be found in the Welsh collection.³⁷ The key medical belief in medieval Wales was Galenic humoral theory, for which there is far more evidence.³⁸ Galen was a Greek physician who had a large impact on medical theory.³⁹ He believed that everything is made of the four elements of fire, air, earth and water that when combined equal hot, dry, cold and wet. The digestion process transforms food and drink into the humours, the four main types of which are blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm.⁴⁰ A patient's health and personality are then directly linked to how the humours are balanced in their body, where an imbalance may cause a person to be choleric, sanguine, melancholic or phlegmatic and imbalances are corrected using food, drink or remedies that either have the same or opposite qualities (this is called treatment by contraries or similarities).⁴¹ The following table shows the relationship between the humours and their associated properties:⁴²

Humour	Quality	Element	Associated Temperament	Produced by	Associated with planet/s	Associated with
Blood	Hot & Wet	Air	Sanguine (cheerful, sociable)	Liver	Jupiter	Childhood
Yellow Bile	Hot & dry	Fire	Choleric (irritable, energetic)	Gallbladder	Sun & Mars	Youth/early manhood
Black Bile	Cold & dry	Earth	Melancholic (thoughtful, gloomy)	Spleen	Moon & Venus	Middle age
Phlegm	Cold & wet	Water	Phlegmatic (calm, slow)	unknown	Saturn	Old Age

Medieval medicine was also influenced by the science of astrology, with a series of rules that decided the importance of the Zodiac in a person's life and which parts of a body were controlled by which Zodiac sign⁴³. It was believed that the four elements, humours and characters were associated with the four seasons of the year and the four ages of

³⁵ Owen, Meddygon Myddfai, p. 227.

³⁶ Owen, M.E., The Medical Books, p. 37.

³⁷ Owen, Meddygon Myddfai, p. 228.

³⁸ Owen, M.E., The Medical Books, p. 38.

³⁹ Britanica, Galen, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galen>>, [accessed 20 Dec.2025].

⁴⁰ Owen, M.E., The Medical Books, p. 38.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 38.

⁴² The Four Humours of Galenic Medicine, University of Oxford, <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/four-humours-galenic-medicine>>, [accessed 19 Dec. 2025].

⁴³ Owen, M.E., The Medical Books, p. 38.

man. The cycle of life was in turn linked to the cycle of the year reinforced further the association with the four humours with six or seven of the planets, which provided one of the bases for astrological medicine.⁴⁴

One of the most prevalent diagnostic tools in humoral medicine is that of uroscopy, or the examination of a patient's urine as a way of diagnosing humoral imbalances, although blood and stools were also used by the medieval doctors in their diagnosis.⁴⁵ In *The Physicians of Myddvai: Meddggon Myddfai*, there is a section on Urinal Pathology which includes an extract from the Book of 'Hywel ddu Feddyg' (see above for comments on the authenticity of this document), in which it states 'From the condition of a man's urine, may be distinguished his defects, dangers, fevers (plagues,) and diseases, whether he be present or absent'.⁴⁶ The author continues with instructions as how to diagnose the patient based on a colour classification system that would have been like the image below, in addition the doctor would also consider the consistency and smell of the urine when making a diagnosis.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The Four Humours of Galenic Medicine

⁴⁵ Owen, M.E., *The Medical Books*, p. 38.

⁴⁶ Pughe, J., 'Urinal Pathology - Four Urinary Elements' in Ithel, J.W. editor *The Physicians of Myddvai: Meddggon Myddfai*, (Felin Fach: Llanerech Publishers, 1993), p 69

⁴⁷ Ibid. P. 68.



Fig. 1. Epiphaniae medicorum, uroscopy and ring of flasks via JSTOR

In addition to diagnosing illness, doctors also treated illness often according to the Galenic theory by one or more of the following methods: bloodletting; the application of leeches; surgery; the application or ingestion of a remedy.⁴⁸ Bloodletting, or phlebotomy, was usually performed by cutting the skin and draining the blood into a bowl but could also involve the use of leeches. In some cases, no blood was split but a process known as 'cupping' was used in which hot metal cups were placed on the skin which had the effect of drawing the humour to the area of the body that required treatment. To decide when would be the optimal time to perform a bloodletting, manuscripts contained calendars, for example British Library Additional 14912 (BLAdd).⁴⁹ According to M. E.

⁴⁸ Owen, M.E., *The Medical Books*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 42.

Owen the Welsh medieval manuscript do not contain any extended tracts on bloodletting but do have some short references to the optimal calendar days and mention the use of leeches. A very good example of bloodletting as part of galenic theory come from Diana Luft's book *Medieval Welsh Medical Texts: Volume One: The Recipes* :

There are two types of piles, wet piles and hot piles, and they originate in the summer. Hot piles issue from the heat of the summer. Wet piles issue from the wetness of the summer, should the blood dry up in it. There are four veins from the liver which go to the posterior, and this is how it is done: bind three of them, and leave the fourth one free, and cauterise on the small of his legs and around his knees and his kidneys, and let blood from the ankles to the thighs.⁵⁰

Most manuscripts contain drawings indicating which points on the body should be used for bloodletting.⁵¹

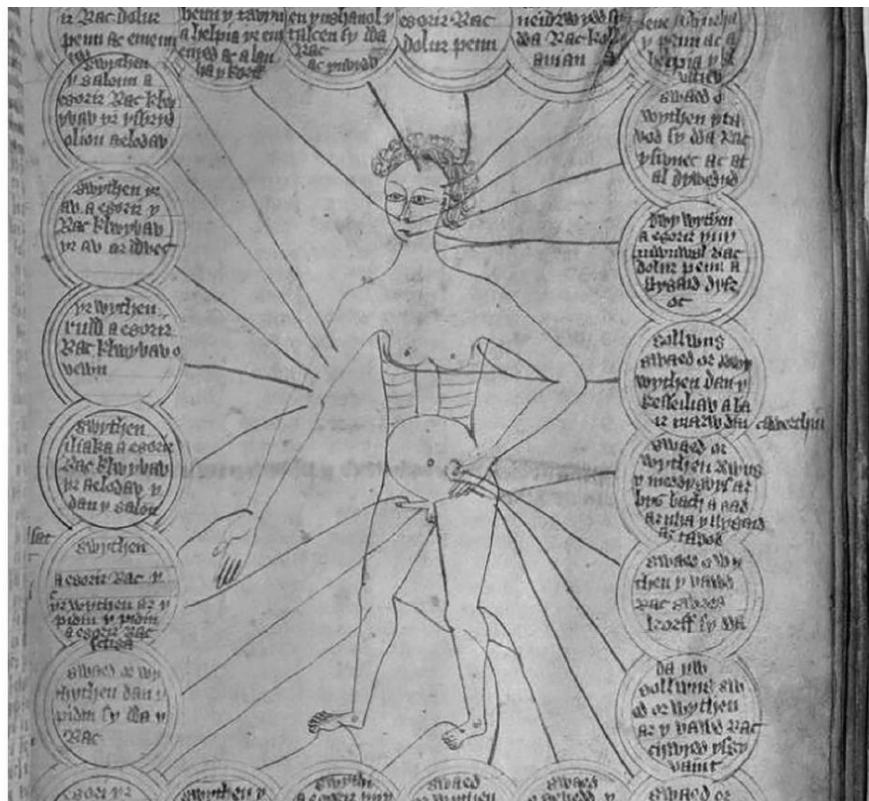


Fig. 2. Bloodletting Man from NLW MS. Mostyn 88

Surgeons existed during the medieval period, but it is most probable that operations in Wales were undertaken by physicians, rather than specialist surgeons. In the Welsh medieval manuscripts, there are references to three surgical processes which M.E.Owen has recorded as being 1- trephining, a process in which an incision is made in the skull

⁵⁰ Luft, *Medieval Welsh*, p. 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 40.

to remove a bone shard that has occurred as the result of an injury (potentially a battle injury): 2 – ligation of haemorrhoids: 3 – Removal of a bladder stone. Owen also notes the use of a form of anaesthesia during operations that consisted of plant-based ingredients.⁵² A further example taken from Luft's book shows the application of Galenic theory:

Also hare bile, eel bile, and the bile of a chicken or a cockerel, and the brightest foam from old honey, and the clearest water, and mix it together in a bright clean vessel, and let the eyes be daubed with that gently with a feather. Galen says, the eyes that are daubed with that ointment will be able to see the stars in the light of day.⁵³

In conclusion, the story of the Physicians of Myddfai may owe something to the aspirations of those involved with the Welsh Celtic Revival but this does not detract from the fact that it remains a very popular folktale and appeals to those interested in Welsh folklore, scholars of medieval Welsh history and language along with those interested in medieval Welsh medicine. Whilst the version of the Physicians that appears in the medieval manuscripts, together with the examples of their trade, highlights the level of success they must have obtained in their profession and the esteem in which they were held. The medieval Welsh medical manuscripts provide a wonderful insight into the fledgling world of professional medicine

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⁵² Ibid. pp. 40-41.

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Oxford, Bodleian Library (on behalf of Jesus College), MS 22, Medieval Middle Welsh medical texts

Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Sotherby, MS C2, Medieval Welsh medical texts and prose