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The Medical Books of Medieval Wales and the Physicians of Myddfai

MORFYDD E. OWEN

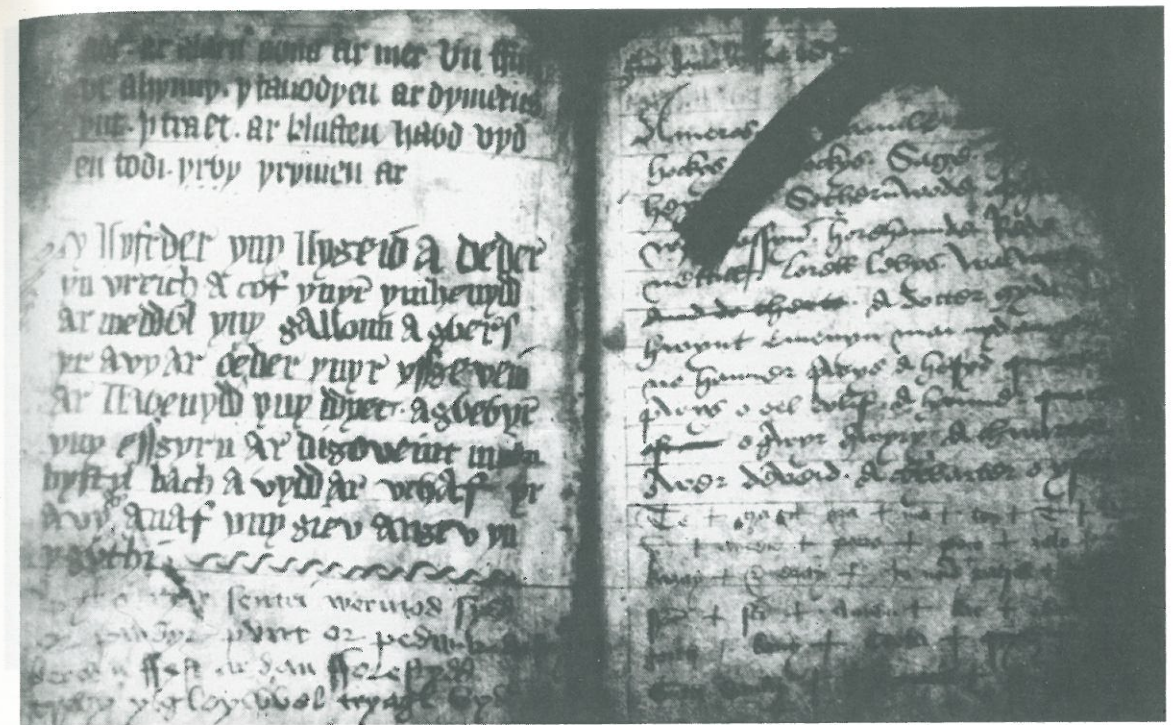
To say that evidence for the medical history of medieval Wales is fragmentary is an understatement. Although we know of the existence of monastic infirmaries, of leper hospitals,¹ of the *hospites* of the St. John's Hospitallers,² and of the names of various physicians and medici from the historical records,³ we know little of the art practised at these centres or by these men. A study of the Dyffryn Clwyd court rolls over a period of ten years in the late Middle Ages, for instance, has yielded few possible medical references.⁴ This lack of historical evidence makes the vernacular medical literature of Wales of foremost importance for the medical historian as well as for the linguist and student of medieval Welsh prose. That literature is inextricably bound up, in the popular and written tradition of modern Wales, with the name of Meddygon Myddfai. Any paper in the *Carmarthenshire Antiquary* on Welsh medicine must take notice of these traditions.

Unlike most papers which deal with Meddygon Myddfai, this paper aims at conveying the nature of the medical literature transmitted in the Welsh vernacular at the end of the Middle Ages and what this tells us about the practice of medicine in Wales at that time. I shall do this in traditional Welsh fashion by taking three headings, first the manuscripts themselves, secondly their contents and thirdly the evidence for the importance of Meddygon Myddfai in the transmission of medical learning in the Welsh vernacular. Of the Welsh manuscripts which belong to the period before 1500 some manuscripts

whose contents consist very largely of medical material survive; another important manuscript contains a very famous medical text. Let us look at some of the manuscripts:

1. The first of these manuscripts, BL Add 14912, is in the British Library where it went with the collection of the London Welsh School in 1840.⁵ Written towards the end of the fourteenth century it was at some time in the possession of the fifteenth-century poet Dafydd Nanmor, who signed it twice,⁶ of the sixteenth-century humanist William Salesbury⁷ and was known to the eighteenth-century Welsh antiquary Lewis Morris who claimed it to be the original manuscript of Meddygon Myddfai.⁸ It is a small manuscript some 4" by 6" in dimension and consists of some 180 pages. The vellum is not of particularly good quality. The contents begin with a calendar which records saints' days and church feasts. Four Welsh saints' names are recorded, Dewi and Curig in red ink, Padarn in black and Derfel⁹ in a later hand. Since local saints give a guide to the provenance of a manuscript I should hazard a guess that this manuscript originated from Carmarthenshire or Cardiganshire where there are dedications to Padarn, Dewi and Curig, and that the manuscript later went to the area of Llan-derfel. The collection ends with a medical glossary.¹⁰

2. The second manuscript is in the South Glamorgan Library in Cardiff and is number 16



Pages from Oxford, Bodleian Rawlinson MS. 467a.

in the Havod collection.¹¹ This is a larger manuscript, 9 1/2" by 6 1/2" in size. In its present state it contains 100 pages of medical material. About a fifth of its contents are written in Latin; a small part is written in French.¹² The medical material had been bound together with some 10 pages of a well-known Middle Welsh religious collection the rest of which is now preserved in Llanstephan Manuscript 27,¹³ generally known as the Red Book of Talgarth. The original binding consisted partly of leaves of a manuscript of the Harmony of Clement of Llanton, a text which originated at Llanton abbey.¹⁴ These facts suggest that in the sixteenth century at the period of the dissolution of the monasteries the manuscript was possibly in the area of Talgarth and Llanton. By the seventeenth century it was in Glamorgan in the possession of the poet Dafydd Benwyn¹⁵ and one William David Barry of Pencoed, whose will was proved in 1654.¹⁶ From Barry's hands it went into the collection of Thomas Wilkins, the antiquary, who was rector of St. Marychurch in the Vale of Glamorgan.¹⁷

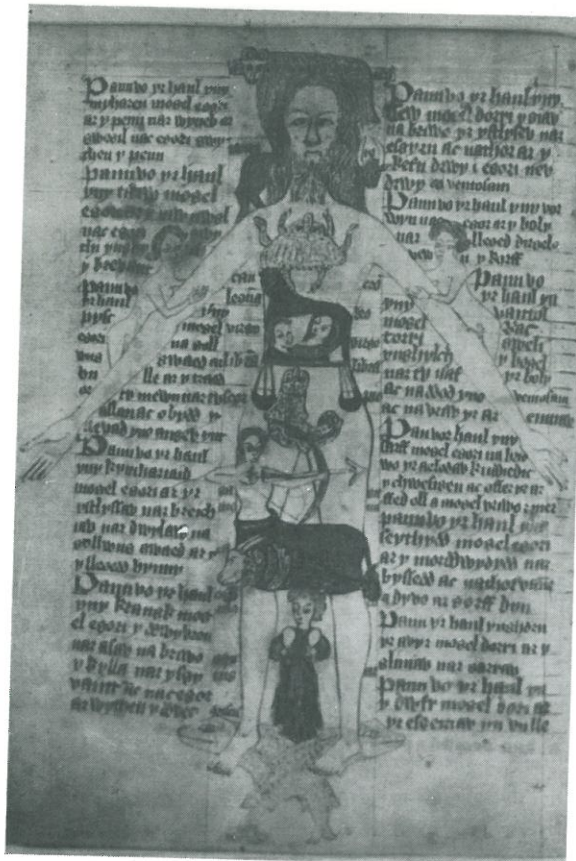
The third and fourth manuscripts are kept at Bodley's Library at Oxford.

3. The third is 467a in the Rawlinson Collec-

tion, a small manuscript, 4 1/4" x 5 3/8". The manuscript reached Oxford from the collection of Edward Lhuyd who had been given it in 1696 by D. T. Thomas, of Cwr y Waun, a farm between Llangadog and Myddfai.¹⁸ It is a composite book, whose first gathering was originally separate from the rest of the manuscript. The main part of the manuscript, which is in at least three separate hands, is very stained. It has an old leather binding. The handwriting of the first section can be dated to about 1400 and approximates in style to that of the Red Book of Hergest.

4. The fourth is number 22 in the Jesus College Collection.¹⁹ This again is a small manuscript, 5 1/8" x 3 1/4" and again it begins with a calendar. The manuscript was written some time after 1400 in a type of debased bookhand which was common towards the middle of the fifteenth century. Much of it consists of lists of foods and drinks.

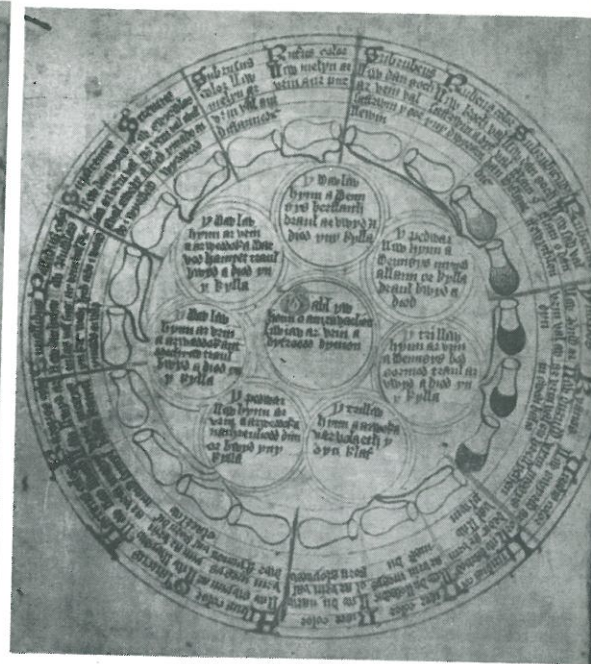
5. The last of the truly medieval manuscripts, Mostyn 88 is by far the most colourful.²⁰ This manuscript is larger than the others, some 9 1/8" x 6 3/4" in size and is in the collection of the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. Writ-



Zodiac Man from NLW Mostyn MS. 88.

ten by the poet Gutun Owain at Valle Crucis Abbey during the years 1487 and 1488, it contains two compilations, the one a medical text, the other a Life of St. Martin of Tours translated by Siôn Trefor,²¹ who was abbot of Valle Crucis and an uncle of Gutun Owain.²² The manuscript again begins with a calendar but this time it is followed by a series of colourful illustrations which include a volvelle, a zodiac man, an illustration of the points of the human body used in bloodletting and a uroscopy circle. These illustrations have their parallels in Latin manuscripts as well as in medical compilations found in other vernaculars.²³ Some of these parallel manuscripts formed a physician's or physicians' vade mecum.²⁴ Valle Crucis in the fifteenth century was a particularly lively cultural centre and receptive to intellectual influences from England.

6. It is necessary to mention one other manuscript which is not primarily a medical manuscript. This is Oxford, Jesus College Ms 111,



Uroscopy from NLW MS. Mostyn 88.

the Red Book of Hergest, a great golden treasury of Welsh literature written for the well-known patron, Hopcyn ap Tomos of Ynysdawy and Ynysforgan in the Swansea Valley about 1400 by a school of scribes,²⁵ which contains (columns 928-63) the medical compilation which has claimed the greatest attention. The Red Book of Hergest text was the basis of Ab Ithel's *Physicians of Myddvai* as well as of Pol Diverres *Le Plus Ancien texte des Medygon Mydveu*.²⁶ The inclusion of a medical compilation in the Red Book of Hergest reflects a fashion of the later middle ages when medical literature came to be considered suitable reading for a cultured gentleman.

What was the function of the other books? Three of the manuscripts are pocketbook scale, practical, everyday manuals comparable in their size and format to the lawbooks of the Middle Ages. It is not known who wrote them or for whom they were written. Mr. Gerallt Harries has shown that one manuscript, 'National Library of Wales, Sotheby MS C2 written about 1500 belonged to a doctor, Bened Feddyg.²⁷ It is possible that at least some of these manuscripts were doctors' handbooks and it is worth looking more closely at the contents of one manuscript. I. B. Jones lists the contents of Havod 16 thus:²⁸

- 1 Latin formulae for exorcising different ailments.
- 2-5 List of plant-names in Latin and Welsh
- 11 Properties of honey, salt, mustard, sea holly, pepper, cummin, vinegar, various kinds of meat.
- 14 Aristotle to Alexander the Great on the knowledge of man's body.
- 19 Formulae for exorcising different ailments.
- 21-28 Miscellaneous recipes.
- 29-36 Book of Galen and Hippocrates, consisting of miscellaneous recipes.
- 37-40 The importance of the knowledge of the 12 signs of the Zodiac and their influence on the various members of the body.
- 39-40 Ointments.
- 41-47 Treatise on the rules of diet; the digestion and its philosophy. [*The Regimen Sanitatis* from the letters of Aristotle to Alexander.]
- 47-49 The beginning of Aristotle's letter to Alexander the Great: of four kinds of kings.
- 61-62 Recipes
- 63-6 Properties of leeks, mustard, pepper, sea holly, water purslane, parsley, common hart's tongue, cresses, lettuce, garlic, betony, fennel, rose, rue.
- 66-70 Miscellaneous recipes including the etiology and treatment of haemorrhoids.
- 70 Nutritive properties of meats.
- 70-1 Three kinds of strangury: an operation for calculus.
- 71-3 The Four humours.
- 73 Properties of wheat, barley, oats, beans, peas, turnips, parsnips, onions, garlic, leeks, cabbages, orach, mallows, lettuce, water purslane, parsley, common hart's tongue, cresses, smallage, figs, blackberries, plums and cherries, pears, peaches, orpines, apples, pomegranates, walnuts, small nuts, almonds, fruits of the chestnut tree, fruits of the palm tree, raisins, olive trees, Imperfect at end.
- 81-9 Miscellaneous Recipes
- 89-90 The four elements and the four humours.
- 91-4 The qualities of the urine; uroscopy.
- 94-96 Miscellaneous recipes; bloodletting
- 96 The eight parts of a man.
- 96-100 Miscellaneous recipes.

This list of contents shows Havod 16 to be a very mixed bag. There are lists of plants which formed part of diet and medicine, passages of medical theory, rules for hygiene, a uroscopy, that is, instructions for diagnosing disease by examining the urine, snippets of surgery and references to bloodletting. The collection, as such, is not unlike what is found in manuscripts from England belonging to the same period. For instance London, Harleian 978, a manuscript of the mid-13th century contains a similar collection of material including parts of the *Secretum Secretorum* and a uroscopy.

Medieval European medical learning and literature flowed in two streams, both deriving ultimately from classical sources. The one filtered through in Western Europe from classical times and the German scholar, Henry Sigerist, described this literature as 'short treatises compiled for practical purposes in Greek in the fourth century mostly translated into Latin in the sixth century. In the west these short treatises dealing with urine, pulse, fever, diets prognostic, blood-letting and pharmacology constituted the bulk of ancient literature that was still alive in Carolingian days'.²⁹ The topics listed by Sigerist are evident in the Welsh compilations and indeed some of the passages, for instance a Latin version coupled with a text of 'A list of days for bloodletting and diet in the twelve months of the year' found in the Red Book of Hergest text was copied into a ninth-century Carolingian manuscripts³⁰ and another version coupled with a text was partially translated into a Brythonic language between the ninth and the eleventh century.³¹ In the twelfth and thirteenth century there was a great influx of literature from Arabia transmitted largely by the school of medicine at Salerno and through Spain. The letters of Aristotle to Alexander on Physiognomy and Hygiene belong to this kind of literature.³²

On the other hand, although the collections approximate to what is known of popular collections in English, they do not contain the long treatises normally associated with the medicine of the schools. They appear to contain convenient snippets of information which might originally have been doctors' notebooks. This is not the place to enlarge on what we know of the medieval doctor and his education.

How can we equate the medical knowledge and literature of these texts with the fields of modern medicine? Basically, the medieval col-

lections are concerned with the same fields as is modern medical literature, since they deal with preventive medicine, hygiene, with diagnosis, prognosis, treatment by drugs, diet or surgery together with passages on medical theory. The difference lies in the science which formed the basis of the medicine. In the way that everyday practice today is based on the medical sciences of anatomy, pathology and biochemistry, medieval practice was based on Galenic anatomy and humoral theory which derived from the works of Hippocrates and Aristotle.³³

We have, in fact, little anatomy in the books. The compiler of Havod 16 tells us in Latin that there were 219 bones in the human body, 362 veins and that a man had 30 teeth and a woman 32.³⁴ Three of the major organs are classified as the 'three thick indispensables' namely, the liver, kidney and heart and another three as the 'thin indispensables', namely, the membrane of the brain, the larger intestine and the urethra.³⁵

We have far more evidence of Galenic humoral theory. Galen conceived of everything as being composed of the four elements of fire, air, earth and water. Combinations of these humours corresponded to the four qualities of hot, cold, dry and wet. Like everything else the foods which animals consume consist of these elements in four degrees of intensity. In the process of digestion food and drink turn into bodily juices, the humours, of which there are four main kinds: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. These are the nourishment of the body which consequently owes its existence to the humours. The elements do not exist as such in the body but are represented by the humours. The predominant humour determined the temperament of an individual which could be sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic or melancholic. Inbalance in the humours produced disease which was corrected in treatment by chosen drugs or diet since drugs and foodstuffs also have their qualitative composition so that the deviation of the body or of one of its parts can be corrected by offering food, drink and medicine of either the opposite quality or of the same quality. This is known as treatment by contraries or treatment by similarities. The greatest part of the Welsh collections consist of long lists of plant and animal recipes aimed at treatment of disease arranged in a head to foot order, together with a listing of the qualities of foodstuffs and of their use in diet.

Another pseudo-science greatly influenced the practice of medieval medicine, namely the science of astrology. It was believed that the planets and stars also possessed the humours and qualities and that the position of the planets in the zodiac controlled life on earth. A series of detailed rules determined the nature of the importance of the Zodiac in man's life.³⁶ One of the beliefs was that every one of the signs of the zodiac had particular control over each part of man's body. The first sign of the zodiac, Aries controlled the head, the last, Pisces 'the cold fish', the feet. The situation of the sun in the zodiac determined the time when special treatments should or should not be given. One particular treatise which expounds this theory in the Welsh books is sometimes accompanied by a picture of a human body on which the zodiac signs are superimposed.³⁷ Another pragmatic instance of the application of the humoral theory is seen in a method frequently used in order to reach a diagnosis. The texts contain examples of a uroscopy whereby the doctor examined the urine of a patient in order to discover the nature of a disease.³⁸ Uroscopies, usually beginning with a discussion of the humours, are found in Latin from the ninth century onwards. The uroscopy method probably derived ultimately from instructions given by Hippocrates and Galen, the chief doctors of the old world. According to these treatises, the colour, translucence and smell of the urine were signs of the nature of the disease and its prognosis. The different characteristics of the urine showed the nature of the humours which determined the state of the body and the mind since according to the tracts: 'by the qualities of the urine man's faults and dangers and infections and illnesses are shown.'³⁹ — a statement which would concur with the outlook of many a modern nephrologist who looks on the world as one big kidney and that an unhealthy one! Some of the Welsh texts have a table illustrating how the colour of urine could be judged. Manuscripts from other sources and countries have illustrations which throw even further light on the process, such as the illustrations which show ladies with their urine bottles, scenes, not altogether unremiscent of a present day antenatal clinic.⁴⁰ The doctor often offered a diagnosis based on uroscopy without actually seeing the patient. This examination of urine speci-

mens was in many ways the forerunner of the methods of a modern pathology laboratory.

One of the most popular texts of the period is in several collections; this was the *Secretum Secretorum*, a collection of various material, which purported to be a series of letters written by Aristotle to Alexander the Great.⁴¹ The collection was written in Arabic in the ninth century although it claimed to derive from earlier Greek sources. In the twelfth century a full version was translated into Latin by Philip of Tripoli and an abridged version by Johannes Hispaliensis. The work was influential in the Salernitan medical school and Dr. Meinir James, who has studied the Welsh translations, offered the theory that the text was transmitted throughout Europe by doctors.⁴² Sections of both the full and the abridged versions were translated into Welsh and Havod 16 has three treatises which derive from the longer version. These are the *De Sanitate Tuenda* (pp. 41-7) the *Physiognomia* (pp. 14-19) and the *De quattuor regibus* (pp. 47-9) The first two treatises occur in many of the medical books. The *De Sanitatis Tuenda* gives instructions on how to live healthily. It emphasises the importance of physical exercise, personal hygiene and psychological aids such as fine clothing as means of ensuring a healthy life.⁴³

The *Physiognomia*, its Welsh title is *adnobod-igaeth corff dyn*, shows how analysis of a man's appearance can reveal his temperament and character. Appreciation of a man's temperament has been important for the doctor in every age and this medieval text reflects another age's approach to psychology. The treatise begins by describing the characteristics of the head and working downwards a *capite ad calcem*.⁴⁴

What do these books teach us of the illnesses the doctors recognised and the treatments they offer? The Havod 16 manuscript mentions over 200 diseases which vary from serious conditions such as cancer and St. Antony's Fire to some as minor as toothache. One can judge the seriousness of the condition from the number of remedies. The incurables, such as gangrene, inspired very many recipes. Considerable attention is given to bites of all kinds, snake bites, bee stings, dog bites. The diseases tend to be classified into categories. One section deals with the diseases of women.

The most obvious method of offering treatment was by means of medicine and a consider-

able part of the manuscripts consist of recipes, treatments for internal and external use, pills, potions, drinks and ointments, lotions and powders. Some recipes have many constituents corresponding to those of the complicated recipes of the antedotaria of the famous medical centres. The majority have few constituents and come into the category of simples. The constituents are mainly vegetable, but some are animal or mineral:

To improve a man's hearing: take boar's urine and clarified honey and mix it together well, and let it drop into the ear, having been cooled to the warmth of new milk.

Take two pounds of burnt lime and mix it with a pound of all spice and put all that in a pot to boil with water, and then take it from the fire and put it to dry.⁴⁵

The usage of many recipes was based on the Galenic theory of humours and the doctrine of opposites, that is, if an illness were due to an excess of phlegm, which was wet and cold, this would be treated with herbs classified as hot and dry to restore the balance of humours in the patient's body. The texts say, for instance, that 'Lettuce is cold and wet in the second degree'.⁴⁶ Some herbs were used with an approach which seems to us quaint on account of the plants similarity to an organ of the body. An example of such a practice is the English 'eyebright' used for infections of the eyes.⁴⁷ This practice is known as the doctrine of signatories. Other remedies were used empirically on the basis of previous experience of their efficacy. **Probatum est**, *Fe'i profwyd* is a frequent comment at the end of a recipe. A surprising number of these recipes have a long history having reached the vernacular through Latin translations of Greek and Arabic works. Dawson in his edition of a middle English medical collection points out that some can be traced even further.⁴⁸ This can be said of some ingredients in the Welsh collections. For instance in one recipe wax is to be mixed with 'a little milk of a woman who is suckling a male child'.⁴⁹ The same material is mentioned in the work of Dioscorides, Hippocrates and in the Ebers papyrus of 1500BC. Some of the recipes were universally popular: instructions for making the ointment known as *Gratia Dei*, 'Rhad Duw' in Welsh, appears in varying form in recipe collections across Europe. It was listed among the campaign drugs

of Edward II,⁵⁰ and has its name on a jar in one of the model apothecaries shops in the Wellcome Museum in London. Many recipes give prominence to the ingredients. Others give prominence to the disease:

For swelling or pain in the dorsal spine. Grind the root of the celandine and the fennel, and garlic herbs and vinegar or wine, and butter and poultice it around your neck and it will reduce the pain and the swelling.⁵¹

Some seem wild and weird to us:

Take a black toad which is unable to crawl, and beat it with a stick until it becomes furious and so that it swells until it dies, and take it and put it into an earthenware cooking pot and close the lid on it so that the smoke may not escape nor the air get into it, and burn it in the pot until it is ashes, and cast these ashes on it.⁵²

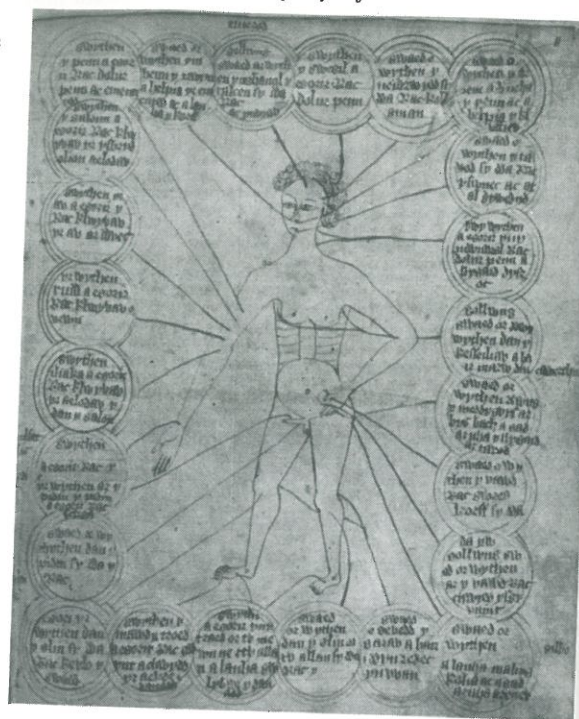
It is easy to be supercilious regarding the inefficacy of the recipes but some must have been effective. The sixteenth-century *Welsh Leechbook*, belonging to a slightly later period but containing much of the material found in the earlier collections describes a 'copprys water good for the eyes'.⁵³ I am told that eye drops of weak copper sulphate solution are still sometimes used.

The Welsh doctors used mortars, earthenware pans, brass vessels and sundry other equipment for preparing their potions. They also seem to have known of classical apothecaries' measures; some of the manuscripts contain tables explaining measures such as scruple and drachma:⁵⁴

A scruple is the weight of twenty grains of wheat, and thus is it written in the books on medicine. A drachm is the weight of sixty grains ...

Treatment could be by cautery or llog and also by bloodletting. Auspicious outcome of the bloodletting depended on the day on which venesection was performed, hence the calendars.⁵⁵ There are no extended bloodletting tracts in our collections, just brief references to suitable days in the calendars, to mention of leeches used for bleeding and brief instructions for the letting of blood.⁵⁶

Blood should be let until it changes its colour. If it flows black, allow it to come out until it becomes red. If it is thick, let it flow until it becomes thin. If it is watery, let it flow until it is thick.



Bloodletting Man from NLW MS. Mostyn 88.

Some manuscripts have pictures showing the points for phlebotomy or bloodletting. There is a notable one in Mostyn 88 which contains what must be a well-known medieval medical joke: 'Bleeding from under the armpits can cause death from laughing'.⁵⁷ A comparable illustration is again found throughout medieval Christendom. Variant versions of the same illustration can be found in later Welsh manuscripts.⁵⁸

These are all the methods of physicians but there is some mention of surgery; the medieval Welsh handbooks refer to three surgical processes, namely:

1. trephining, that is making an incision in the skull chiefly to remove a piece of bone which has reached there as the result of a wound. This surgical process was known to primitive tribes as well as to the sixth-century Irish and to the Anglo-Saxons.⁵⁹
2. ligation of haemorrhoids⁶⁰

and

3. lithotomy or removal of a bladder stone. The Welsh instruction follows the procedure of the 'apparatus minor'⁶¹ and the description is surprisingly similar to the treatment that Thomas Jones of Denbigh suffered at the hands of a country doctor in the 18th century and recorded in his diary.⁶²

Some of these treatments must have been excruciatingly painful. The books also describe a form of anaesthesia consisting of a potion made during the Dog-days and administered by means of a sponge:

This is a potion which, when taken, causes man to sleep when he be opened; wherever the wound may be the potion eases the pain. Take the juice of opu-tebagia, the sea holly, the papaver, namely the poppy, mandrake, rood ivy, blackberries, hemlock, lettuce, each one in equal amount. Let them be mixed in a clean earthenware dish and left in it, and let this potion be made during the Dog-days and when preparations are being made to open the patient, cause him to watch as long as possible and after that, let some of the mixture be put in his nostrils and he shall sleep without pain.⁶³

A form of this recipe is found in the Bamberger antedotarium of the ninth century⁶⁴ as well as in the collection of the Englishman Gilbertus Anglicus in the thirteenth.⁶⁵ A French scholar, Madame Baur, in the 1920's conducted a series of experiments to test the efficacy of this treatment.⁶⁶ It was not a success.

If medicine and surgery failed the doctor muttered a Christian charm. The Havod 16 collection contains 11 charms written in both Latin and Welsh.⁶⁷

For the bite of a serpent or a sick dog write these words around the bottom of a vessel made of sycamore, and take clean water and delete that writing, and give [the water] to the bitten person to drink before he goeth to sleep + Zable + leo + fortis + decim + cephans +

These then would seem to be the types of medicine known to the Welsh-speaking Welshman in late medieval Wales. How far they reflected the reality of treatment it is difficult to know. There has always been a gap between practice and literature in medicine. After all why should a medieval doctor stick to the guidelines of his notebook any more than a modern day psychiatrist or physician adhere to the recommendations of the National Formulary. Weird and wonderful though they may seem to us today these recipes and descriptions are the only treatments for which we have written evidence. They were probably all that was generally available at that time not only in Wales but throughout Europe. What is interesting is that some people saw fit to translate and adapt this literature into Welsh and that the language was cap-

able of expressing it. Who were responsible for this adaptation?

Four of the manuscripts attribute at least part of the work to a family of physicians, Rhiwallon and his sons, Cadwgan, Gruffudd and Einion. Two treatises, the one explaining the significance of the signs of the zodiac, the other beginning with a reference to craniotomy or trephining, have at their head a colophon, which names these doctors.

- (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.⁶⁸

- (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 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.⁶⁹

Similar colophons occur but without the names of the doctors in other sources, both in Welsh, for instance in Havod 16, where a version of the first colophon cited above without the doctors' names occurs at the head of the text citing the importance of the twelve signs of the zodiac,⁷⁰ or in Middle English.⁷¹ Some of the sentiments expressed in the passages such as 'And the reason they caused the rules of their art to be written down in this way was lest there be none who knew them after them', derive ultimately from the work of Galen.⁷² Someone, at some point in time, has seen fit to associate these Welsh treatises with the names of Rhiwallon and his sons. It is a well-known phenomenon that professional texts and collections become attributed to figures famous in the history of that profession.

Rhiwallon and his sons are supposed to be the progenitors of the most famous family of



Surgeon-Major Edward Hopkins.



Lieut.-Col. Edward Powell, D.S.O., R.A.M.C.

physicians of Welsh tradition, the Physicians of Myddfai. According to the second colophon cited above they were the doctors of Rhys Gryg, Lord of Dinefwr who died in 1235.⁷³ Rhys Gryg was a son of the Lord Rhys of Dinefwr (d.1197) who amassed for himself a substantial kingdom in South Wales. Both the Lord Rhys and his descendants were great patrons of learning of all kinds. The core of Rhys' kingdom by the thirteenth century were the two cantrefi of Cantref Mawr and Cantref Bychan. The caput of the area was Dinefwr, the ecclesiastical centre Llandeilo Fawr. After his father's death the greater part of these two cantrefi passed eventually into the hands of Rhys Gryg. The cantrefi of medieval Wales were divided into administrative units or *cymydau*; the *cymydau* were further divided into economic units or *maen-orau*.⁷⁴ During the thirteenth century Myddfai was a royal manor. We know from the Welsh laws that the princes of Wales had court doctors.⁷⁵ By the end of the thirteenth century the whole of Wales had fallen to the Anglo-Normans. Among the dues recorded for the Lordship of Llanymddyfri in the later middle ages is an unusual due of service, namely that the ten free tenants of the Maenor of Myddfai were obliged to supply the lord of Llanymddyfri

with a doctor to follow him in Wales at his expense.⁷⁶ It seems possible in view of the colophon and the evidence of the dues of the Lordship of Llandovery and what is known from the law texts that lands in Myddfai could have been held by a family of lay physicians, originally mediciners of the Lords of Dinefwr, subsequently of the Anglo-Norman lords of Llandovery. The descendants of these physicians were ultimately probably represented by a family of folk physicians, famous for their remedies and their books. Rawlinson B 467a, a manuscript from the Myddfai area, was possibly one of these books. A social pattern of hereditary professional families is a common one in Celtic lands.⁷⁷ Popular tradition maintains that the descendants of Rhys Gryg's physicians lived in farms in the Myddfai area and their names are preserved in farm names such as Llwyn Ifan Feddyg and Llwyn Maredudd Feddyg. They gathered their herbs, so tradition has it, in Pant y Meddygon or Gwaun y Meddygon. Mr. David James has recently pointed out that the escarpment around Llyn y Fan is particularly rich in flora.⁷⁸ Professor David Bellamy noted rare plants at Dinefwr. The last of the line who were supposed to have practised in the area were John Jones and David Jones although it has

recently been shown that they in fact worked in Llandinog.⁷⁹ A gravestone recording the death of these men is preserved in the porch of Myddfai church and their names are recorded in the parish registers. The eighteenth century antiquary Lewis Morris is reputed to have met the son of the David Jones who had abandoned the calling because he 'considered it beneath him or because he was brought up to other things'.⁸⁰ Later doctors, working elsewhere, still claimed descent from the Myddfai physicians.⁸¹ Like other early well-known doctors this family of physicians became attributed with supernatural origins. They were considered to be descended from a fairy from Llyn y Fan Fach who had

married a mortal and given a magic book of recipes to her sons. Versions of this legend are printed in many sources and the story is all too familiar to Carmarthenshire people. The legend belongs to a type of folk legend found associated with many other lakes in Wales.⁸² The belief, held until recently, that the fairy appeared every year on the first of August, Llammas Day, retains vestiges of the celebration of the old Celtic feast of Lugos or Lleu.⁸³ The tradition of the remarkable medical skills of members of the family has remained strong and twentieth-century doctors have been proud to claim descent from the physicians of Myddfai and their fairy mother.

NOTES

- 1 J. Cule, 'The diagnosis, care and treatment of leprosy in Wales and the border in the Middle Ages', *Transactions of the British Society for the History of Pharmacy* (1970), 129-59.
- 2 W. Rees, *A History of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in Wales and on the Welsh border* (Cardiff, 1947).
- 3 See, for example, the names cited by W. G. Harries, 'Bened Feddyg' in *Wales and Medicine*, ed. J. Cule (Llandysul, 1975), 179, n. 7.
- 4 I am indebted to Dr. Oliver Padel for this information.
- 5 *Catalogue of Additional manuscripts in the British Museum* 1840.
- 6 Ff. 16' and 61'.
- 7 For Wiliam Salesbury, see ff. 20', 52', 54', 61' and 72'.
- 8 J. H. Davies (ed.), *The Letters of Lewis, Richard, William and John Morris of Anglesey, 1728-1765*, Vol. II (Aberystwyth, 1909), 284.
- 9 The most comprehensive guide to Welsh saints dedications is still S. Baring-Gould and J. Fisher, *Lives of the Cambro British saints* Vols. 1-4 (London, 1907-13).
- 10 Ff. 87ff and published by W. Stokes in *Archiv für celtische Lexicographie* i (1898), 37 ff.
- 11 *Historical Manuscripts Commission Report on Manuscripts in the Welsh language* (RWM) ii 318; and for the text see I. B. Jones, 'Havod 16', *Etudes Celtiques* 7 (1955), 46-75, 270-339; 8 (1958), 66-97, 346-93 and cf. T. J. Morgan, 'Meddygon Myddveu a Hafod 16', *BBCS* 7 (1935/7), 306-18.
- 12 P. 7.
- 13 RWM ii. 138. I recognised this fact when the manuscript was on deposit at the National Library of Wales in 1978 and a note to the effect was added by Mr. Daniel Huws, later Keeper of Manuscripts at that institution.
- 14 N. R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries* II (Oxford, 1977), 365-7.
- 15 See Havod 16, pp. 7, 23, 24, 27, 67, 69, 81, 82, 84, 88, 95, 97, and 98 and cf. G. J. Williams, *op.cit.*, *passim* and D. H. Evans, *The Life and Work of Dafydd Benwyn* (D.Phil., Oxford, 1981), xxv.
- 16 See Bishops transcripts for the diocese of Llandaf.
- 17 See G. J. Williams, *Traddodiad Llenyddol Morgannwg* (Caerdydd, 1948) *passim*.
- 18 I am indebted to Mrs. Gifford Charles-Edwards for her palaeographical analysis of the manuscript. Inside the cover are written these words: Edvardo Luidio donavit D. T. Thomas a Cwr y Wayn apud Maridunenses. Anno 1698 and see W. G. Harries, *art.cit.* 178.
- 19 See RWM ii, 38 and M. E. Owen, 'Meddygon Myddfai: A Preliminary Survey of some Medieval Medical Writing in Welsh', *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975-6), 210-33.
- 20 RWM i 16-8.
- 21 For Gutun Owain, see J. E. C. Williams, 'Gutun Owain', *A Guide to Welsh Literature* 2 (ed.) G. R. Hughes and A. O. H. Jarman (Swansea, 1979), 262-77.
- 22 For Siôn Trefor see E. J. Jones, 'Siôn Trefor, Llyfr Arveu and Buchedd Saint Martin', *BBCS* 5 (1929-31), 33-40; *idem*, *Buchedd Saint Martin* (Caerdydd, 1945).
- 23 See P. M. Jones, *Medieval Medical Miniatures* (London, 1984); L. E. Voigts, 'Scientific and Medical Books', in ed. J. Griffiths and D. Pearsall, *Book Production in Britain 1375-1475* (Cambridge, 1989), 345-400.
- 24 C. H. Talbot, 'A Medieval Physician's Vade Mecum', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Science* 16 (1961), 212-33.
- 25 B. F. Roberts, 'Un o lawysgrifau Hopcyn ap Tomos o Ynys Dawy', *BBCS* 22 (1966/8), 223-8; G.

- Charles-Edwards, 'The Scribes of the Red Book of Hergest'. *CLIGC* 21 (1980), 246-56; C. James, 'Llywr Wybodau Llên a Llyfrau': Hopcyn ap Tomas a'r Traddodiad Llenyddol Cymraeg', in *Cwm Tawe* (gol.) H. T. Edwards (Llandysul, 1993), 4-44.
- 26 P. Diverres, *Le Plus Ancien Texte des Meddygon Myddveu* (Paris, 1913); J. W. ab Ithel, *The Physicians of Myddvai* (Llandovery, 1861).
- 27 W. G. Harries, *art.cit.*
- 28 Jones *art.cit.*, EC 7 46-7.
- 29 H. Sigerist, 'Materia Medica in the Middle Ages', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 7, 417-23.
- 30 E. Wickersheimer, 'Textes Medicaux des IX^e, X^e et XI^e siècles', ed. E. A. Underwood, *Science, Medicine and History* (1) (London, 1953), 171.
- 31 See W. Stokes, 'A Celtic Leechbook', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 1 (1897), 17-25.
- 32 M. A. Manzaloui, 'Kitab Sirr al-asrar: Facts and Problems', *Oriens* 23/4 (1974), 148-257, *idem* *Secretum Secretorum, Nine English Versions* (EETS, 1977); E. M. James, *Secretum Secretorum, astudiaeth feiriadol o ddetholiadau Cymraeg a Lladin o'r llythyr ffug-Aristotelaidd at Alecsander Fawr*, (Ph.D. Aberystwyth, 1986).
- 33 See, for example, O. Temkin, *Galenism, rise and decline of a medical philosophy* (London, Cornell, 1973).
- 34 See Havod 16, p. 56.
- 35 See Diverres, *op.cit.*, 122.
- 36 Cf. Temkin, 17.
- 37 For zodiac men see J. E. Murdoch *Album of Science: Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York, 1984), 315-17; H. Bober, 'The Zodiacal Miniature of the *Tres Riches Heures*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 11 (1948), 1-34.
- 38 For uroscopies see K. Wentzlau, *Frühmittelalterliche und salernitanische Harntraktate* (Inaugural Dissertation, Leipzig, 1924); H. Leisinger, *Die lateinischen Harnschriften Pseudo-Galens* (Leipzig, 1925).
- 39 See Jones *art.cit.* EC 8 368.
- 40 L. Mackinney, *Medical Illustrations in Medieval Manuscripts* (London and Beccles, 1965), 213.
- 41 E. M. James, *op.cit.*
- 42 *Ibid.*, 182-3.
- 43 Jones, *art.cit.*, EC 7 312-23.
- 44 Jones, *art.cit.*, EC 7 64-73.
- 45 Jones, *art.cit.*, EC 7 275, 295.
- 46 Jones, *art.cit.*, EC 7 334.
- 47 Cf. T. Hunt, *Plant-names of Medieval England* (Bury St. Edmunds, 1989), l.
- 48 W. R. Dawson, *A Leechbook* (London, 1934), 14.
- 49 Jones, *art.cit.*, EC 8 391.
- 50 E101/179/3.
- 51 Jones, *art.cit.*, EC 7 312; Diverres 76.
- 52 Diverres 98.
- 53 T. Lewis, *The Welsh Leechbook* (Liverpool, 1914), 421, \$420.
- 54 Jones, *art.cit.*, EC 7 391.
- 55 See MSS BL 14912 1ff.; NLW Mostyn 88, 13-24.
- 56 Jones, *art.cit.*, EC 8 379, 393.
- 57 MS NLW Mostyn 88, 11.
- 58 MS NLW Llanstephan 117, 88.
- 59 Cf. 'Trepanation' in J. Filip, *Enzyklopädisches Handbuch zur Ur- und Frühgeschichte Europas*, Band 2 (Stuttgart, 1969), 1484-5; for the Irish see E. MacNeill, 'A pioneer of nations', *Studies* 11 (1922), 13-28 and for the Anglo-Saxons see C. Wells, 'Probable trephination of five early Anglo-Saxon skulls', *Antiquity* 48 (1974), 298-302.
- 60 Cf., for instance, P. Murray Jones, *Medieval Medical Miniatures* (London, 1984), 101.
- 61 D. de Moulin, 'Cutting for the Stone in the Early Middle Ages', *Bulletin for the History of Medicine*, 45 (1971), 76-9; H. S. Shelley, 'Cutting for the Stone', *Journal of the History of Medicine* XIII (1958), 50-67.
- 62 G. P. Jones, 'Thomas Jones a'r Maen Tostedd', *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Sir Ddinbych* 6 (1957), 45-52.
- 63 T. Huseman, 'Die Schlafschwamme und andere Methoden der allgemeinen und ofleichen Anästhesie im Mittelalter', *Deutsch. Zeitschrift Leipzig* 42 (1896), 51-96.
- 64 H. E. Sigerist, *Studien und texte frühmittelalterlichen zur Rezeptliteratur* (Leipzig, 1929), 378.
- 65 H. E. Henderson, *Gilbertus Anglicus, Medicine of the Thirteenth Century* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1918), 65.
- 66 M. L. Baur, 'Recherches sur l'Histoire de l'Anesthésie avant 1846', *Janus* 21 (1927), 170-82.
- 67 Havod 16, 1.
- 68 BL 14912 f. 17^r.
- 69 Diverres, 6.
- 70 Jones, *art.cit.* EC 7, 305
- 71 Cf. Dawson, 19.
- 72 Temkin, 49.
- 73 For the Physicians and Rhys Gryg, see Owen, *art.cit.*, Diverres, *op.cit.*; Ab Ithel, *op.cit.*; D. James, *Myddfai, its land and peoples* (Llandre, 1990), 25-41
- 74 M. Richards. 'Welsh Administrative and Territorial Units' (Cardiff, 1969).
- 75 J. Cule, 'The Court Mediciner and Medicine in the Laws of Wales', *Journal for the History of Medicine*, 21 (1966), 213-36.
- 76 *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem* 10 Edward II Extent 12th January and extent for Monday after St. Davids.
- 77 For hereditary families, see especially F. Shaw, 'Irish Medical Men and Philosophers' in *Seven Centuries of Irish Learning*, ed. B. Ó Cuív (Dublin, 1961), 75-86 and J. Bannerman, *The Beaton's: a medical kindred in classical Gaelic tradition* (Edinburgh, 1986).
- 78 D. James, *op.cit.*, 41.
- 79 H. Davies, *Welsh Botany* (London, 1813), p. vii.
- 80 D. James, *op.cit.*, 40.
- 81 See *Welsh Medical Gazette* 12, Winter, 1971.
- 82 See, for example, Ab Ithel, *The Physicians of Myddfai* (Llandovery, 1861); P. Diverres, *op.cit.*, xxviii; R. Fenton *Tours in Wales* (1804-1813) (ed.) J. Fisher (London, 1917); J. Rhys, *Celtic Folklore*, vol i Welsh and Manx (Oxford, 1901), 1 ff.; and D. James, *op.cit.*; for a recent discussion and bibliography, see J. Wood, 'The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales', *Folklore* 103 (1992) 56-72.
- 83 Máire Mac Neill, *The Feast of Lugnasadh* (Oxford, 1962).