

ANGLO-SAXON MAGICO-MEDICINE

The value of studies of belief, cosmologies and symbolic systems generally is now widely accepted. The Structuralists have shown them to be far too important to be relegated to the periphery of anthropological investigation. But why should an anthropologist concern himself with the present topic, when presumably an Anglo-Saxon scholar would be better qualified linguistically to do so? Let me, in answer, quote the words of Singer and Grattan, perhaps the foremost authorities on the subject. They sum up Anglo-Saxon medicine as:-

'A mass of folly and credulity.'

We may ask whether the people who translated and illuminated the 'Herbarium', whose remedies show such a wealth of plant names, did not show a real botanical awareness. Apparently not:-

'No Anglo-Saxon had any knowledge of these (the Linnaen) presuppositions. Furthermore, the men who wrote the Early English magico-medical texts seem to have been almost incapable of enumerating exactly nor had they much appreciation of measure or weight though they often copied lists of these. Their colour discrimination was poor and their vocabulary for colours meagre and vague.'

The work of Marcellus Empiricus, which was apparently of great influence among the Anglo-Saxons, is summed up as:-

'A mass of disgusting absurdities which touch the depths of pagan superstition, further depraved by the incursion of Christian symbols.'

I am sure I need not comment. One recognises a severe lack of the anthropological perspective. The book from which these quotations are taken was published - by the way - in 1952.

The study of Anglo-Saxon magico-medicine presents an anthropologist with special problems. We have to accept the evidence on the subject bequeathed to us by a whole series of historical disruptions and disasters. Viking raids, library fires, and Christianity seem very often to have conspired to rob us of the very stuff of research. But if the quantity of data is thus reduced, its breadth is not. There remains a mass of tantalising hints and possible connections.

Germanic scholars sometimes bemoan the religious conversion of their noble savages as a fall from grace. For the anthropologist it appears rather as a change from an oral to a written culture. Christianity is the religion of the book par excellence.

The factor of limited literacy creates a severe difficulty in that we no longer have a closed community. The small self-contained social world that we would ideally hope for from a primitive people has already been shattered by contact with Romania when the Anglo-Saxons emerge as a distinct force. There is an elite exposed to a wider intellectual internationalism. A wedge has been driven between two sections of the community. The linguistic expression of this is the use of Latin.

These problems can be exaggerated. They are not new to Africanists. We have to decide how far translated material was incorporated into the collective consciousness and how far it

remained specialised knowledge on the scriptorium shelf. We can safely exclude the more obviously learned translations and retain a sizeable corpus for analysis. The basic mistake hitherto made by Anglo-Saxonists is to deal with ultimate historical origins instead of looking at the synchronic system.

There are, it seems, a number of logically possible ways of reacting to the problem of disease. Disease can be seen as caused by the invasion of the body by alien matter or force from without. Treatment then consists in removing it. It can be viewed as the loss, by a man, of something normally inherent to him. In this case, treatment consists in returning it to him. A third possible view would be to see disease as caused by a disruption of the natural order within the body. Here, treatment would entail re-establishing that order. While using this third approach, the Anglo-Saxons view disease as fundamentally an attack by the exterior on the cultural sphere and so may be fairly described as having opted for the first world-view.

Three basic mechanisms enabled the outside to attack the inside in the Anglo-Saxon conceptual world.

Firstly, there were 'flying venoms'. We unfortunately know very little about these. Our knowledge is derived primarily from the tantalising "Nine herbs charm". This is an exceedingly complex charm which has caused much learned ink to be spilt to little purpose. The basic facts are clear. Infectious diseases are seen as the "hateful foe who roves through the land". They attack Man, but the use of herbs and incantations to Woden offer protection.

This charm also introduces the second mechanism of causation. The snake being the bearer of venom, it is associated with disease, especially when Christian theology has cast the forces of evil in this form. But here we must beware. The Anglo-Saxon term for snake "wurm" is generic, designating most of the insect and reptile category. This raises the whole question of animal classification. It has always been assumed that when the Anglo-Saxons write of poisonous bites from spiders and frogs, they are translating literally from Mediterranean texts. Let us note, however, that a wholly English work such as the Peterborough Chronicle speaks of people being put to death with toads. I would further suggest that those penitential prohibitions forbidding the consumption of food touched by wild animals and rodents are not mere results of "Exodus" but reflect Anglo-Saxon categorisations.

Returning to the "Nine herbs charm", we see that it depicts Woden slaying a snake with nine magic twigs and - significantly - banishing it from the homes of men. The generic nature of the term "wurm" becomes clear when we consider parallel passages in the literature. "Solomon and Saturn", a much neglected source, tells of a seaman "Wandering wolf" who slew 25 dragons, perishing himself in the process and liberating the forces of disease. "Therefore, no man may visit that land, that boundary place, nor bird fly over it, nor any cattle. Thence the poisonous race first widely arose which now boiling with breath of poison force their way."

The third source of illness lies in the lesser evil spirits, dwarfs, elves and Christian devils. For the Anglo-Saxons, as for many primitive peoples, there is a strong opposition between the cul-

tural sphere of the village and the wild areas beyond, especially uninhabited marshes and forests, - uninhabited by humans that is - because this is the home of the giants, monsters, elves and dwarfs. Marsh is, of course, splendidly liminal, being neither completely land nor wholly water and St. Guthlac is by no means the only saint to have to wage war on swart marshland spirits. Turning again to the literature, we note that in "Beowulf" the monster Grendel is "A solitary marsh stalker". At this level of abstraction, those outdated interpreters who saw the poem as representing the ravages of disease and hostile elements are not far wrong. Structurally the model is the same and these 19th century interpretations are another - most enlightening - recension. This view of the world found its expression on the legal plain in that a stranger wandering in silence away from the road was classed as a thief and could be slain with impunity.

The link with the previous explanations of disease is again to be found in "Solomon and Saturn". Here the devilish hordes are described thus:-

"Sometimes they seize the sailor or turn into the body of a snake, sharp and piercing."

and later:-

"When the devil is very vicious, he seeks the cattle of a wicked man ... or if he comes across a man's unblessed mouth or body, he then enters the forgetful man's bowels and goes down to the earth through his skin and flesh and thence to the wastes of hell".

Elves, especially, were pictured as firing little arrows or spears into humans and domesticated animals to cause ailments like rheumatism and loss of voice and there is extant a leechdom showing the healer's job as extracting and hurling back the spear. It is worthy of note that weapons were often "poisoned" by making vipers marks on them and it is presumably arrows thus treated that are poetically referred to as "battle adders".

I think we are now in a position to relate this approach to disease to the general attitude of the Germanic peoples to fortune, misfortune and medicine.

The primitive Germanic peoples saw Man as being the focus of divine forces. Central to the problem is the concept of Gothic hails. In many ways it was similar to mana. I do not propose to introduce a lot of linguistic material but let us just note the etymological relationship, still preserved in modern English, between the words heal, whole, health and holy. These concepts were still intimately related for the Anglo-Saxons. "Hælu" was good fortune, material prosperity, health and salvation. It was mediated to Man by king, priest, or certain material objects. Illness was a state of "unhælu" where "un" signifies both a lack of "hælu" and the presence of a negative "anti-hælu". This then gives us a choice of remedies. Either the intrusive bad force can be removed or a transfusion of "hælu" into the body can be given. Both can, of course, be combined. This attitude is a suitable candidate for baptism and is readily adapted into the belief in saints' miracles.

From this view of the world stems the leech's concern with ingestion and excretion. Spew drinks and purgatives are the physician's chief weapons. He is constantly spitting, blowing and letting blood, while applying salves to the outside and drinks to the inside. The basic concern is with deconstructing the present state and redefining boundaries.

As examples of removal of harmful intrusions, consider the following:-

Against elfshot (rheumatism) the leech is to cry out, "Out little spear, if you are in there, out spear, not in spear".

The treatment of warts:-

"First take a stick of hazel or elder wood, inscribe your name on it, cut three incisions on the spot. Fill the name with your blood, throw it over your shoulder or between your legs (symbolic excretion) into running water. Cut the incisions and do all this in silence."

In these last two, the venom is symbolically removed from the body and returned to the unstructured wild by the running water. Similarly:

"For fellon catch a fox, strike off from him - alive - a tooth. Let the fox run away. Bind it in a fawn's skin, have it on you."

In like manner, a crab's eyes are removed and placed on the neck of a man with eye disease. The crab then returns blind to the water. Here, exchange with the environment is to redress the balance and restore the correct state of affairs.

For protection against hostile powers, to prevent their reinforcement during treatment or re-entry afterwards, boundaries are reaffirmed. Thus, there is a leechdom against the dangers to which a man is exposed on a journey:-

"I draw a protecting circle around myself with this rod and commend myself to God's grace, against the sore spasms and the sore bite and the fierce horror and ... etc."

Similar, is the concern with doors and thresholds, e.g. "Against sudden death of swine. Take lupin Drive the animals to the fold, hang the herbs on the four sides and on the door, etc."

Or,

"Also inscribe a cross on the four sides with a sword and let the man drink the draught afterwards."

In like manner, the drawing of boundaries seals the affected area, as in the following remedy for the bite of an adder:-

"Make one ring round about the bite then the poison will pass no further."

Hence likewise, the use of virgins and cattle of one colour (both "unmāele" in Anglo-Saxon).

Returning to the leechdom for warts quoted above, we notice the imposition of silence as a factor in treatment. The whole field of communication in Anglo-Saxon is rather complex but we can observe its chief characteristics.

Speech is an incorporating act. It establishes contact. For the Anglo-Saxons, words commanded what we would class as inanimate objects. During ritual situations, speech must not be dissipated for with it would go the power which the speech is releasing and directing. While engaged in a cure therefore, a leech is to ignore a greeting as it would incorporate the man into the sphere of action in which power is being released. Immediacy of contact is important for what Frazer termed "contagious magic". Thus when a man's goods are stolen:-

"Then you must say first of all, before you say anything else ... etc." There follows a charm.

Too much linguistic interference would reduce the strength of the transmitted message. Similar considerations lie behind the constant repetitions and parallelisms of the spells, e.g. for stolen cattle:-

"Garmund, servant of God,
Find those cattle and bring back those cattle,
Have those cattle and keep those cattle
And bring home those cattle,
That he never has a piece of land to lead them to,
Nor a district to carry them to,
Nor buildings to confine them in."

Runes are par excellence the means of magical communication. We are not told that the writing on the hazel sticks was done in runes but it is beyond all doubt that such was the case.

Runes have always had heathen, magical associations. Not until very late were they used for ordinary communication, and then only in Anglo-Saxon England (where there was a deliberate policy of baptising heathen practises) and in Scandinavia where the Anglo-Saxons had evangelised. So strong were their pagan associations, in fact, that, rather than use them for his Bible translation, Wulfilas created a whole new Gothic alphabet. That such was still the case in Anglo-Saxon times is clear from the dictionary entry for "run":-

"mystery, secret, secrecy, secret council."

It is believed that they were generally cut in wood and stone and smeared with blood as in our remedies. Inscribing with runes imparted an object with magical power and was a common means of a man "leaving his mark" on his most treasured possessions. They were not used for interpersonal communication but for conversation between sacred and profane through inscribed lots.

Against this background we are better able to understand the use of unintelligible and obscure words from exotic languages in Anglo-Saxon spells and the use of rune staves to mediate between culture and the wild.

The problem of communication presents us with the wider consideration of social contact. The home being the focus of one's

personal identity and family life, restrictions were inevitably placed on what could be introduced into it from the outside. Thus the leechdoms contain numerous statements like:-

"Afterwards you must write this in silence and silently put the words on the left breast and you must not go indoors with the writing."

Or,

"Take a handful of bark and bring it home in silence and never into the house of the patient."

Another spell against miscarriage tells a woman to return the evil to the outside world via running water and continues:-

"When she goes to the stream she must not look round nor again when she goes away from there and let her go into another house than the one from which she started and there take food."

The woman has been cleansed and can now enter once more into commensality with her fellows for whom she no longer constitutes a source of danger.

Some of the remedies stipulate that the bloodied twig removing the evil is to be cast, not into running water, but across a cart road. Presumably this represents a trunk road and is thus to be seen as a channel of communication leading away into the wild. Whether or not the ill is viewed as being transferred to the next person to use the road is not clear. This is, however, apparently the case where a woman wraps part of her child's grave in black wool and sells it to merchants with the words:-

"I trade this,
You trade this,
This black wool
These seeds of woe."

We have now dealt with that area of Anglo-Saxon ethnomedicine that stresses the re-externalisation of intrusive forces. There is however, as mentioned earlier, another way of dealing with the problem. Instead of reducing disease to anthropomorphic proportions, one can expand it to include the whole cosmic order. Disease being a disturbance of this natural order, it can be cured by reaffirming Man's place in the regular course of events. This approach lies at the base of remedies such as the following:-

"In the morning, let him stand towards the East, let him address himself earnestly to God and let him make the sign of the cross, let him turn about with the course of the sun etc."

There is no need to argue whether or not we have here a survival of an ancient sun cult. The question is simply irrelevant. The leechdom is simply to be understood in terms of the underlying theme of order:disorder, inside:outside.

Similar in essence is the use of narrative charms. For example, against toothache, one tells the story of how Jesus cured Peter's toothache. It shows one of the basic mechanisms of Anglo-Saxon medicine, the association of two substances, series of events or

whatever, and the blurring of lines between them. Here the distinction to be blurred is between past and present so that the latter can be assimilated to the former. It fits our model of demonic-wasteland "unhælu" opposed to divine "hælu" that, when the distant order of the cosmos is the object of attention, emphasis is placed on destructuring. When the danger of the wild is relevant, then emphasis is placed on the reaffirmation of boundaries.

Let us now turn to that part of Anglo-Saxon ethnomedicine that deals with herbal and animal remedies. Animals and herbs form an important part of that outside world to which the Anglo-Saxons were seeking to relate in their medical practices. As Lévi-Strauss has taught us, they were also "good to think".

Before going further, a word of warning. I mentioned earlier some of the special problems offered by Anglo-Saxon data. It is doubtless while asking "Why this particular remedy for this particular disease?" that the failings of our documents are most apparent. The basic problem is that often we do not know what disease is being dealt with, and even more often we cannot positively identify the herb prescribed. Any attempt to correlate these two unknowns is therefore subject to great difficulties. A certain amount of intelligent reconstruction is possible, but the dangers of the most vicious form of circularity are manifest.

The remedies divide, as mentioned, into salves and drinks. Salves are especially used for afflictions of the skin. It is here that worms are most active and in the orifices of the body. This is what we would expect to follow from the Anglo-Saxon model of hostile external forces seeking to penetrate inside. The more a disorder is specifically localised, the more likely it is to be treated by a salve. The more diffuse maladies are treated by drinks. Both may be remedied by an infusion of "hælu" in the form of holy water blessings etc.

The general principle is an association of symptoms and remedies with a subsequent destructuring to achieve identity of the two. The remedies involve grinding, stirring, straining, boiling, burning, slicing and beating. All the ingredients are to be reduced to a destructured mass which is then applied to the body. Consider the following, wholly typical, instructions:-

"... Mingle together and whip up, let it stand till it be clear ..."

Or,

"... Scrape them very small and pound them thoroughly."

The standard "carriers" of the herbal ingredients in salves are butter, lard and oil. It is clear from the leechdoms that these are chosen for their smooth, unstructured malleability and formlessness. When applied to a rough skin or wound they restore that smooth unpunctured epidermis that was not only a sign of safety but also of beauty. They also act as exchange mechanisms. Hence the use of butter as a drink for herbal poison:-

"If a man eat wolfsbane, let him eat and drink butter, the poison will go off in the butter."

In drinks, the standard "carriers" are water, ale, wine, vinegar, and honey. Wine and ale are intoxicants and this gives us a clue to the reason for their use. Alcohol is commonly used in our own society to "break the ice", to free people from their inhibitions and break down barriers. This is not the place for a digression on Anglo-Saxon drinking customs, but let us just note in passing the importance attached to drinking to the point of complete intoxication to celebrate a marriage agreement or simply as a manifestation of the solidarity and unity of a warrior retinue with their lord. The relevant herb having been selected, an interchange must occur between it and the patient. The use of alcohol in this process is another means of attaining that destructuring which is also the result of the mechanical operations mentioned above.

Another striking feature of recurrent elements in the leechdoms, is the large number that have undergone a form of cultural destructuring. Here are to be mentioned butter, cheese, whey, ale, wine and vinegar, which have undergone curdling and fermentation, both cultural forms of decay. They are thus in a strange intermediate category, having decayed while not having "gone bad". Decay, like disease, was viewed as an external aggression and the remedies given in our documents for calamities of the dairy and kitchen make it quite clear that the lesser forces of evil are involved. Similarly, one of the standard entrance requirements for sainthood was the failure of one's body to decay after death, which Bede takes as proof of virginity. This class of foods is therefore strangely liminal and well suited to bridge the gap between the cultural and non-cultural spheres.

Honey, salt and vinegar have, moreover, yet another quality that qualifies them for medical service in that they are preservatives. We have plenty of evidence for the use of salt. Most of the cattle had to be slaughtered in autumn, owing to the lack of winter feed-stuffs, and their carcasses were salted down for the winter. This salt meat was the sole means of survival. As regards the use of vinegar for pickling and honey for preserving fruit, evidence is sadly lacking at the moment. We do, however, have ample evidence for the use of another regular ingredient, namely oil. This was employed in the embalming of holy bodies and apparently responsible for those saintly miracles of preservation.

One last quality of these substances - they were representatives of the basic tastes as were many of the richly aromatic herbs. Honey was the sole source of sweetness of taste for the Anglo-Saxons and vinegar was "sharp" (bitter and sour). We only have to note that salt is a regular remedy and we can postulate that they were also playing variations on the theme of taste. The evidence supports this. Consider the following:-

"Baths for bowel disorders; they must be made for them of salt waters; if none can be had, let their food be salted."

"First must be given him what shall still and soothe the inwards, what is neither too sharp nor too austere, nor rending nor caustic."

"Nor let the meat be too sharp, nor too sour, but smooth and fat."

"Give ... him ... salt means with sweetened vinegar, and prepared mustard, and radish to eat, and make him eat all the meats and drinks which have a hot sharp quality."

This links up with the Anglo-Saxon acceptance of the theory of the humours as causing disease, which is also evidenced in our documents. It is to be noted that "sharp" herbs often replace scarification in remedies. There remains much to be said on this subfield of classifications but I should like to pass on to a complementary aspect. While the above remedies work on the basis of "unlike negates unlike" (e.g. hot cures cold), there is also rich evidence of the most basic classificatory mechanism, i.e. "like affects like": Thus we find the whole set of sense impressions given by a plant harnessed to an attempt to determine its uses. Let me give some examples. For swellings and warts, bulbous plants are used; for "wrist drop" limp, creeping plants. Poison is treated with "attorloth", (poison hater) a plant with a long, twisted root like a snake.

Often the link between ailment and cure seems mainly linguistic. In the long bone salve (Lacnungal 2) the alliterative associations that are the basis of Anglo-Saxon poetry have been harnessed in the service of medicine, e.g. "Beet and betony, ribwort and red hove" There then follows a list of tree barks. Now, in remedies for skin complaints, barks play a large role. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, the tough outer bark makes a good symbol for the skin which is the external boundary of the body. Secondly, it has the bitter taste associated with vermifuges in Anglo-Saxon medicine. This stems from the presence of tannic acid which the Anglo-Saxons would know from its use to preserve animal hides from decay. We may therefore take the use of bark as symbolising the skin. The next ingredient is a whole series of animal fats, which symbolise the fleshy covering of the bones. The remedy then goes on:-

"Then let one collect together all the bones which can be gathered and beat the bones with an iron axe and seethe and skim off the grease, work it down to a round lump," (the fats having been previously reduced to a similar shape).

All the ingredients are then mixed and reduced to a tar. In the preparation of the salve the three constituents of the body have been compounded together from numerous plants and animals, rendered anonymous and destructured, ready for use on the human frame.

I mentioned earlier the "Nine herbs charm". Let me now return to it. It alludes to nine magic herbs, effective against nine venoms. Each of these venoms is associated with a particular colour. This explains why the Anglo-Saxons were later able to adopt so easily the theory of humours (hot, cold, moist, dry) which occurs associated with the classifications of taste. Our text is here, however, badly corrupted. It obviously once had the form of alliterative verse which has now been partly lost. One of the colours is repeated twice so that its position in the list is no longer clear. One of the terms is a unique occurrence. The list of herbs occurs again in a different order and the list of diseases they cure has obviously been just padded out to reach the number nine. But it does give us the clue that colour was significant in the treatment of ailments. This, moreover, is what we should have expected, given the use

of other sense impressions for purposes of classification. Much work remains to be done on this particular part of the corpus, especially since there has hitherto been no complete analysis of Anglo-Saxon colour classifications. Preliminary work indicates that, at least in the leechbooks, there are traces of a colour system. For example yellow-flowering herbs are used for the treatment of "geolu" (jaundice), purple and white against demons and red for head ailments. The extent of this system and its precise nature have yet to be established.

The above is no more than a short survey of some of the chief attributes of the Anglo-Saxon magical system. I hope, however, that it illustrates the value of the application of the anthropological perspective to a people remote, not in place, but in time. Anglo-Saxon ethnomedicine is far from being the unstructured mass that some authors have implied, but a rich symbolic system in no way inferior to those treated by anthropologists in other parts of the world.

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Principle Works Used

1. Leechdoms Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England, by Rev. Thomas Oswald Cockayne.
2. The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England, by W. Bonser.
3. Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine, by Grattan and Singer.
4. Saloman and Saturn, by Kemble.
5. The Anglo-Saxon Charms, by F. Grendon.
6. Anglo-Saxon Magic, by G. Storms.
7. Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, by Bosworth and Toller.
8. British Flora, by Bentham and Hooker.