

# Anglo-Saxon Urology

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Figure 1: Base of a Saxon Cross, Rothley, Leicester (ninth century).



Figure 2: Magical amulet in the shape of male genitals (third century, so Roman, but similar would have been used in Saxon times).

In this series of articles I am going to show you some of the exhibits contained in the BAUS Virtual Museum of the History of Urology which is part of the BAUS website ([www.baus.org.uk](http://www.baus.org.uk)). In the last article I promised you some magic and asked if you had heard of Bald the Leech! Bald was a Saxon and a Leech (or *laece*) is the Saxon word for doctor.

The Anglo Saxon period from 410AD, when the Romans left Britain, until 1066 has been called the Dark Ages but there is a surprising amount of Anglo Saxon literature including over 1000 pages of medical texts. Some are translations or copies from Greek and Latin but some are clearly Anglo Saxon in origin giving us a tantalising glimpse into the work of the Anglo Saxon doctor. The Leechbooks of Bald were compiled about 900AD, in the reign of King Alfred and were commissioned by Bald, presumably a doctor (or rather Leech!).

The diet of the Anglo-Saxons was poor and it is likely that many suffered from urinary calculi. Stone disease was mentioned in the Leechbooks; the Anglo-Saxon word for bladder pain was *blaedderwaerc*. A treatment for bladder stones was Meadow Saxifrage boiled in ale with parsley; an alternative treatment was to eat a roasted starling with boiled Wood-Marche. For urinary retention other herbs were suggested such as cumin, nigella, yarrow and fennel, invariably steeped in a bowl of

wine, but also given were sodden rams bladders, roasted goose tongues and a roasted fish within fish. The treatment for urinary incontinence was the ashes of burnt boar claws or alternatively a fried goat's bladder. Perhaps a little more palatable was the remedy for haematuria which was dog roses in water or ale.

For pain "where the kidneys are lodged", the Leech was instructed to "catch a dung beetle ... wave him strongly ... and say thrice, 'Remedium facio ad ventris dolorem'; then to throw the beetle over his shoulder without looking back. This was supposed to give the Leech's hand the power to heal renal pain for a year. This was clearly magic and formed one part of Anglo-Saxon medicine. Indeed, the Leech's ring finger was known as the 'leech finger' and was the finger with which they touched the sick spot in order to cure the illness.

We know that faith can be a great healer and in Anglo Saxon times this could mean magic or Christianity (Figure 1). Both were clearly used as the Bishops forbade the use of magic charms in medicine (Figure 2).

I expect you have all seen a patient with ureteric colic and will recall the fear instilled by this excruciating agony that comes seemingly from nowhere. The Saxons believed that this sudden loin pain, with no obvious cause could only be due to the invisible arrows of elves, or elf shot. Again, the treatment was magical. A charm against

elf shot was used; this is an extract from one of these spells [1].

*Out, little spear, if herein it be!  
A smith sat, hammered a knife,  
small iron, serious wound.  
Out, little spear, if herein it be!  
Six smiths sat, they forged slaught-spears.  
Out, spear, be not in, spear!  
If herein be a piece of iron,  
witches' work, it must melt.  
If you were shot in the skin or were shot  
in the flesh  
or were shot in the blood, or were shot  
in the bone,  
or you were shot in the limb, may your life  
never be injured;  
if it were gods' shot or it were elves' shot or it  
were witches' shot, now I will to help you.*

It's easy to laugh at the Leeches' mix of herbology, magic and prayer but of the 185 plants in one Saxon Herbarium, 130 are still found in a modern herbal. About two thirds of the Saxon treatments would have given some relief (although not a cure) and belief in a cure whether magical or religious is a powerful thing.

Next time, how a similar belief led the British Government to pay a woman £5000 for a recipe for a cure for bladder stones.

#### Reference

1. Translated by Benjamin Slade, available from: <http://www.heorot.dk/suddenstitch.html>