

MAGICAL MEDICINE IN VIKING SCANDINAVIA

by

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By the year A.D. 1213 Christianity was victorious across Europe; only a few isolated pockets of paganism in remote districts of Sweden, Finland, and Moslem Spain held out against what must have seemed to be the inevitable influence of the Church. Nordic expansion was in eclipse. The age of the Vikings was at an end. The marauders who had loosed such fury on the continent to the south, had, in the end, succumbed to the cultural influence of the very peoples against whom their expeditions had been directed. The *mare nostrum* of the Roman age had long since ceased to be the centre of European political gravity. Even in cultural matters the domination of Rome and the Mediterranean was being challenged.

A thousand years had elapsed since the death of Galen, the dominant authority in medieval medical practice. Avicenna, Rhazes, Isaac Judaeus, and Albucasis, the towering figures of Arabic medicine, had been dead some two hundred years. The renowned medical school at Salerno was in full maturity.

The date 1213 is significant in the medical history of Scandinavia because it marks the year in which the kindly Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, the most famous physician in medieval Scandinavia, lost his life in the very middle of a productive and multi-faceted career. Hrafn's life may be looked upon as something of a watershed in the medical history of Scandinavia. Behind him were eons of magical medicine in the Germanic past, when wise-women and conjurers recited their incantations against the spirits of disease and sufferers from diverse illnesses called upon the gods of the North for a return of health. In front of Hrafn was the ever-increasing influence of the medical centres on the continent from which the doctrines of Galenic and Arabic medicine were being disseminated. There is more of the new in Hrafn than there is of the old; one can find in his medical practice the distinctive mark of the Salernitan school¹ grafted on to native concepts of disease.

Even before Hrafn, the new medicine of the south was making inroads throughout Scandinavia. It had undoubtedly begun to follow the Christian religion to Iceland after the conversion of that country in A.D. 1000. From Latin sources we know that there was a Roman infirmary near the present site of Düsseldorf in northern Germany by the first century A.D.

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¹ Ingjald Reichborn-Kjennerud, 'The School of Salerno and surgery in the North during the Saga Age', *Ann. med. Hist.*, 1937, 9: 321-337.

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After Hrafn, the old Germanic traditions would never account for very much in the practices of those Nordic physicians who would be privileged to study abroad, though remnants of the old, at least in folk medicine, come down into our own time.

Among the heathen Germanic peoples one finds medical practice growing out of religious conceptions. It was a small step from the recognition of gods as super-human creatures to the invocation of these gods for the aid of the believer. That aid might be material or spiritual, and frequently it seems to have concerned health and disease. We are given a fleeting glimpse of such superstition in an incidental passage recorded by Gregory of Tours concerning the heathens of northern Germany around A.D. 500:

So it came that when [King Theodoric] went to Cologne, [St. Gall] went with him. There was there a heathen temple full of various articles of worship where the neighbouring barbarians used to make offerings and stuff themselves with food and drink until they vomited; there also they worshipped images as god and carved limbs in wood, each one the limb in which he suffered pain.³

The heathen Germanic peoples worshipped many gods. The relative importance of an individual god varied with the locale. For example, Thor might be particularly revered in Iceland while Freyr and Odin were more highly regarded in Sweden and Denmark. The conception of a particular god also showed evolution across time.³

Odin (the Scandinavian name for the Anglo-Saxon Woden) was the principal deity in the Germanic pantheon. The traditions and myths that surround him are subject to controversial interpretation and are not entirely consistent. However as god of death and magic, he is of major importance in elucidating heathen magical medicine. In the Old Norse literature Odin appears in a myriad of disguises and under dozens of names. He might typically be encountered travelling incognito as an old man blind in one eye. He is a sinister and enigmatic figure, powerful in controlling the affairs of men, but powerless to avoid his own destruction in the Ragnarök, the twilight of the gods.⁴

A passage in the *Hávamál*,⁵ one of the poems in the *Elder Edda*, describes the mysterious self-sacrifice of Odin which led to his acquisition of great knowledge. He hung for nine days on the “windswept world-tree” called Yggdrasil. Here he gained knowledge of runes. Subsequently he drank water from Mímir’s spring and the mead of Óthroerir, which seem to have imparted further wisdom.

The runes are spoken of in the Old Norse literature in both a literal and figurative sense. On one hand they refer to the alphabet employed by the heathen Scandinavians, consisting of sixteen to twenty-four letters depending on the region and the period in question. This runic alphabet was used from about A.D. 200 until well beyond the thirteenth century. During this period knowledge of runes (which meant ability to write) does not seem to have been common knowledge. Partly for this reason the written word was held in awesome regard and a tradition of magic grew up around it,

³ Gregory, Bishop of Tours, *History of the Franks*, tr. Ernest Brehaut, New York, Columbia University Press, 1916, p. 261.

⁴ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Scandinavian mythology*, London, Hamlyn, 1969, p. 50.

⁵ ‘Hávamál’, *The poetic edda*, tr. Lee M. Hollander, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1962, p. 36. Here and elsewhere when good English translations of Old Norse works are known to me I have cited them.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

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as is evident in the *Hávamál* reference cited above. It is clear from context in many passages in the *Elder Edda* that runes connote magical writing and not merely writing *per se*. Odin is speaking when we find admonitions in the *Hávamál* to understand the writing, interpretation, and staining of runes and the proper manner of sacrifice and supplication.⁶ The staining of runes was believed to endow them with special potency, especially if it was done with blood.

In the *Sigrdrífumál*⁷ and the *Hávamál*,⁸ runes are held to be effective in securing lovers, victory in battle, wisdom, easy childbirth, and protection in a storm at sea:

Learn help-runes eke, if help thou wilt
a woman to bring forth her babe:
on thy palms wear them and grasp her wrists
and ask the *ðísir*'s aid.

The *ðísir* are apparently female attendant spirits, generally related to the cult of fertility.⁹

The utility of runes for "all those who would be leeches" is alluded to in the *Hávamál*,¹⁰ but the reference is incomplete. In the *Sigrdrífumál* one stanza suggests an origin in common with the incomplete *Hávamál* stanza:

Limb runes learn thou if a leech would'st be,
and wishest wounds to heal:
On the bark scratch them of bole in the woods
whose boughs bend to the East.¹¹

The power of runes did not always bring good results. Caution had to be exercised to assure that runes were properly inscribed. In the saga of Egil Skallagrímsson, Helga, a sick young girl, became worse due to a misapplied runic engraving on whalebone. Egil was called in and talked with her:

He bade them lift her out of the bed and lay under her clean clothes, and now was it so done. And now he ransacked the bed that she had rested in, and there found he a whalebone, and thereon were the runes. Egil read them, and therewithall he scraped off the runes and shaved them off into the fire. He burnt all the whalebone, and let bear into the wind those clothes which she had had before . . . Egil scored runes and laid them under the bolster in the resting-place where she rested. It seemed to her as if she had wakened out of sleep, and she said that she was then healed.¹²

The inscription that had caused her so much distress had consisted of but ten runic letters.¹³

In Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*¹⁴ there is mention of Odin scratching runes on bark,

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷ 'Sigrdrífumál', *The poetic edda*, op. cit., note 4 above, p. 235.

⁸ 'Hávamál', op. cit., note 4 above, pp. 36–39.

⁹ E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and religion of the North*, New York, Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1964, pp. 224–225.

¹⁰ 'Hávamál', op. cit., note 4 above, pp. 37–38.

¹¹ 'Sigrdrífumál', op. cit., note 7 above, p. 236.

¹² *Egil's saga*, tr. E. R. Eddison, Cambridge University Press, 1930, p. 174.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁴ Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish history*, tr. Oliver Elton, London, Cambridge University Press, 1905, p. 174.

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thereby causing Rinda to become schizophrenic. Even more ominous is the suggestion in the *Helgakvíða Hjörvarthssonar*¹⁵ that runes might bring on death. Elsewhere, Grettir Ásmundarson is said to have died on account of Turid's incantations and runes.¹⁶ She cut the runes on the root of a tree, stained them with her blood, and sang magic songs. Grettir wounded himself on that root and subsequently died, apparently of sepsis.

The belief in the efficacy of runes to promote or damage health was a powerful force in the Germanic world and one that did not die quickly. Many superstitions surrounding runes survived into the late medieval period and Reichborn-Kjennerud¹⁷ has demonstrated their limited persistence in folk medicine into modern times.

The widespread use of runic inscriptions for so many different purposes argues against the interpretation of "branch" or "limb" runes as mere sympathetic transference of the human wound to the tree (or whale). It seems more likely that the act of inscribing the runes gave special force to the formula by converting it from ephemeral to permanent and concrete. The relative permanence of the inscription may have been viewed as the equivalent of repeated recitations of it. One reason for concluding that the "magical runes" were in fact written "spells" is the concomitant mention of "spells" and "runes" at many different points in the eddas. In the *Hávamál*¹⁸ Odin, under the pseudonym Hár, immediately follows his advice concerning the use of runes with his description of eighteen magic spells. The spells purport to aid those in sorrow or suffering ill health, protect those in storms at sea or in battle, and release the chains of those who are fettered.

Unfortunately these chants or spells are themselves not explicitly stated in the surviving manuscripts from the Scandinavian sources; they are only described. However from medieval Germany we do have two exceedingly interesting formulae, clearly heathen in tone, which date from about A.D. 900. One formula is for the loosening of fetters; the second is apparently for the mending of a broken or badly sprained leg. That a chant for loosening fetters is clearly mentioned both in the *Hávamál*¹⁹ and in the *Grögaldr*,²⁰ and that a chant against injury is alluded to, lend credence to the view that chants similar to these Merseburg formulae were used by the heathen Scandinavians. The second formula clearly mentions the names of two gods in the old Germanic pantheon as well as another name of uncertain origin. The formula is preserved in the Old High German:

Phol ende Uuodan uuorun zi holza
du uuart demo Balderes uolon sin uuoz birenkit
thu biguolen Sinthgunt, Sunna era suister,
thu biguolen Friia, Uolla era suister,
thu biguolen Uuodan, so he uuola conda:

¹⁵ "Helgakvíða Hjörvarthssonar", *The poetic edda*, op. cit., note 4 above, p. 176.

¹⁶ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Gúðni Jónsson, Reykjavík, Hid íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936, pp. 257-258.

¹⁷ Ingjald Reichborn-Kjennerud, *Vår gamle trolldomsmedisin*, Oslo, Det norske videnskapsakademi, 1928, vol. 1, p. 145.

¹⁸ *Hávamál*, op. cit., note 4 above, pp. 36-39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*,

²⁰ 'Grögaldr', *The poetic edda*, op. cit., note 4 above, p. 142.

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The typical practitioners of seidr were wise-women (völvur or spákonur), who would sit within a magic circle and summon the spirits from whom knowledge could be gained. In the *Saga of Erik the Red*, a very good description of such a practitioner is preserved. Her name was Thorbjörg. She wore beads around her neck and had a hat of black lambskin. A small bag of magical paraphernalia was attached to her belt. She was reputed to live on kid's milk, porridge, and the hearts of animals (which were felt to impart understanding). She practised seidr during the night and on this particular occasion, was able to say by the following morning that the famine which had ravaged the land was about to subside.

Just what Thorbjörg had in her magic bag we do not know. However Grøn has called attention to an old Norwegian law from the period just after conversion to Christianity that specifically names "hair, toad feet, and human nails" as used in witchcraft.

There is mention in the *Grágás* (the old Icelandic law code) also of magic stones:

People should not go about with stones, nor fill them with magic power in order to bind them to people or their cattle. If people depend on stones for their protection or their cattle's protection from disease, the penalty shall be minor outlawry.²⁹

Stones probably also figured in the wise-woman's armamentarium. Jón Steffensen³⁰ has surveyed many of the grave excavations made in Iceland this century and has noted that burial of the dead with special stones, perhaps the ones they had used during life, was by no means rare. In *Kuml og haugfé*,³¹ Eldjárn has described several finds of stones, often translucent, lying about the pelvic level of the dead person. Sometimes they were in a small purse. In a subsequent report,³² Eldjárn describes a female burial accompanied by a pile of fifty-eight pieces of quartz, some beeswax, and a pair of tweezers. It is tempting to assume this was the grave of a leech practitioner.³³ It is interesting that the belief in stones as aids to health does not seem to have been eradicated by the harsh laws against them in the *Grágás*: the inventory of the church at Hólar, Iceland for the year 1550 includes a stone "to ease childbirth".³⁴

SUMMARY

Prior to A.D. 1213, the heathen Germanic peoples worshipped many gods and medical practice grew out of religious conceptions. Magical medicine and superstitions from the Old Norse literature are discussed in detail.

By the time of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, medical practice had become extraordinarily different. Heathen chants gave way to paternosters, and stones to surgical instruments. Cauterization and phlebotomy came into use. Leeches became predominantly persons of catholic education, and the profession of medicine was increasingly the domain of men. Practitioners of heathen medicine had retreated far into the background.

²⁹ Vilhjálmur Finsen (editor), *Grágás*, Copenhagen, Stadarhólsbók, 1852, pp. 22–23.

³⁰ Jón Steffensen, 'Aspects of life in Iceland in the heathen period', *Saga-Book of the Viking Club*, 1969, 17: 177–205.

³¹ Kristján Eldjárn, *Kuml og haugfé*, Reykjavík, Fylgirit, 1958, pp. 50–51, 74–75, 140–142, 179–181.

³² Kristján Eldjárn, *Árbók hins Íslenska fornleifafélags*, Reykjavík, 1965, pp. 22–23, 46.

³³ Steffensen, op. cit., note 30 above, pp. 177–205.

³⁴ Gudbrandur Jónsson, 'Domkirkjan á Hólum í Hjaltadal', *Safn til sögu Íslands*, 1929, 5: 399–400.