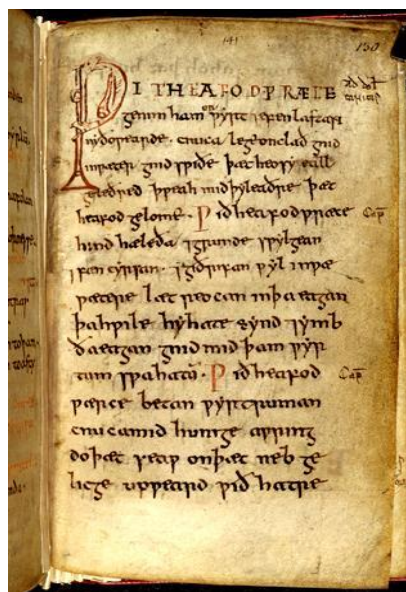


## The Nine Herbs Prayer from the Lacnunga



The first page of the Lacnunga,  
BL Harley 585, ff. 130-193

The *Lacnunga* (from *læc*, healing; the title can be translated as "Remedies") is one of several documents found in a single manuscript, British Library MS. Harley 585. It dates from the 10th-11th century, but some of the material it contains is much older. Most of it is written in Old English and Latin, but it also includes material in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Old Irish.

Containing some 200 treatments using medicinal plants and other materials, the *Lacnunga* provides insight into early medieval theories of disease and healing. Some of the *Lacnunga*'s medical prescriptions include prayers and other invocations. One of the best known of these is the "Nine Herbs Prayer."

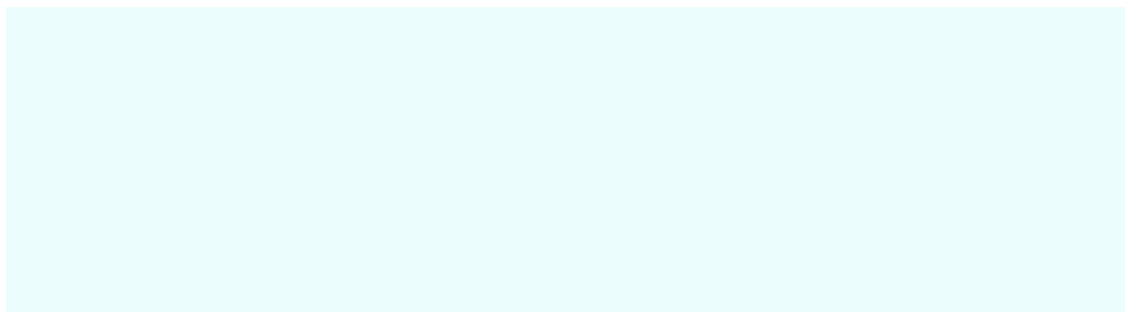
This ritual tells us that, then as now, medical practitioners knew effective health care required meeting the patient's psychological and emotional needs, as well as responding to their physical concerns.

Another role of the Nine Herbs Prayer, translated below, may have been in timing the preparation of medicines. Much as we are told today to sing the Alphabet Song twice while we wash our hands, to be sure we take the time to do a thorough job, reciting or singing this prayer may have helped the physician to macerate, simmer, or stir medicinal ingredients for a specific length of time.

The plants listed in the Nine Herbs Prayer are all found in other early herbals:

1. *Mucgwyrt*, mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*
2. *Weg brade*, plantain, *Plantago major*
3. *Stune*, shepherd's purse, *Capsella bursa-pastoris*
4. *Stunað*, nettle, *Urtica dioica*
5. *Attorlaðe*, betony, *Stachys officinalis*
6. *Mægðe*, chamomile, *Chamaemelum nobile*
7. *Wegule*, crab apple, *Malus sp.*
8. *Fille*, chervil, *Anthriscus cerefolium*
9. *Finule*, fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare*

They were ingredients for a medication to treat *geblæd*, an infection or inflammation of the skin. This salve was sterile, having been boiled -- no small consideration in those pre-antibiotic days -- and it had therapeutic value derived from the plants it contained. Modern pharmacology has begun to document the healing qualities of many herbs, and the nine plants above were indeed "good medicine."



## The Nine Herbs Prayer

*Lacnunga, folios 60-64*

+ **G**emyne ðu mucgwyr  
hwæt þu ameldodest  
hwæt þu renadest  
æt regenmelde  
una þu hattest  
yldost wyrta  
ðu miht wið .iii.  
7 wið xxx.  
þu miht wið attre  
7 wið onflyge  
þu miht wiþ þam laþan  
ðe geondlond færð

+ Mind you mugwort  
what you disclosed  
what you rendered  
at Regenmelde  
The first you are called  
oldest of plants  
you mighty against 3  
and against 30  
you mighty against poison  
and against infection  
You mighty against the evil  
that fares through the land

Each of the nine plants are  
addressed directly, as though  
sentient.

Mugwort, *Artemisia  
vulgaris*, "oldest of plants," is  
frequently named in early medieval  
herbals. Various etymologies have  
been suggested for mugwort:  
English *mug*, as it was used in  
brewing before hops; *muggi*, ON  
for marsh; *mucg*, OE for midge,  
gnat.

Poisons and "onflyge," infections,  
are frequently cited as sources of  
illness.

+ ond þu weg brade  
wyrta modor  
eastan opne  
innan mihtigu  
ofer ðy cræte curran  
ofer ðy cwene reodan  
ofer ðy bryde bryodedon  
ofer ðy fearras fnardon  
eallum þu þon wiðstode  
7 wiðstunedest  
swa ðu wið stonde  
attre and onflyge  
7 þæ laðan  
ðe geond lond fereð :

+ And you waybread  
plant mother  
eastward open  
within mighty  
over you chariots creaked  
over you queens rode  
over you brides trampled  
over you oxen snorted  
This all you then withstood  
and dashed apart  
as you withstand  
poison and infection  
and that evil  
that fares through the land

*Weg brade*, way bread, was also  
well known to medieval physicians.  
Today, we call it plantain, *Plantago  
major*; it grows well in dry, stony  
places, including paths or "ways" --  
even when driven over by chariots,  
queens, brides, and  
oxen. *Bread* may have originally  
read "broad," for it has a broader  
leaf than its equally common  
cousin,  
*P. lanceolata*.

We don't know what is being  
referred to by the comment about  
chariots, queens, etc.

stune hætte þeos wyr  
heo on stane geweoð .  
stond heo wið attre  
stunað heo wære

shepherd's purse this plant  
is called  
she on stone grew.  
stands she against poison  
she drowns out pain

*Stuneð*, Shepherd's purse, *Capsella  
bursa-pastoris*, is less familiar to  
us, though it is named in  
the *Lacnunga* and the *Leechbook of  
Bald*. Another Old English name  
for it is *lombes cærse*, lamb's cress.

stiðe heo hatte  
wiðstunað heo attre  
wreced heo wraðan  
weorped ut attor

nettle she is called  
stands she against poison  
she drives out wretchedness  
throws out poison

*Stiðe*, Nettle, *Urtica dioica*, has  
been used for food, fiber, and as a  
medicinal since the Iron  
Age. Internal diseases with  
unknown causes -- including some  
not caused by parasites -- were  
often believed to be the work of  
worms.

+ þis is seo wyr  
seo wiþ wrym gefeah  
þeos mæg wið attre  
heo mæg wið onflyge  
heo mæg wið þam laþan  
ðe geond lond fereþ .

+ this is the plant that  
against the worm battled  
this mighty against poison  
she mighty against infection  
she mighty against evil that  
goes through the land .

fleoh þu nu attorlaðe . seo læsse ða maran . seo mare þa læssan oððæt him beigra bot sy .	put to flight now attorlothe that less the more. that more the less until for him both are remedied	<i>Attorlothe</i> is likely, in this treatment for skin conditions, to be betony, <i>Stachys officinalis</i> .
gemyne ðu mægðe : hwæt ðu ameldodest hwæt ðu geændadest æt alorforda . þæt næfre for gefloge feorh ne gesealde syþðan him mon mægðan to mete gegyrede .	mind you chamomile what you disclosed what you brought to an end at Alorford . that never to infection a man's life be sold since for him someone chamomile as a meal prepared .	<i>Mægðe</i> , chamomile, <i>Chamaemelum nobile</i> , is another frequently used plant. Alorford (alder ford) appears to be a place name, but the allusion is now lost.
þis is seo wyrt ðe wergulu hatte . ðas onsænde seolh ofer sæs hrygc ondan attres oþres to bot.	This is the plant that crab apple is called the seal sent forth across the sea's back for other poisons a remedy .	<i>Wergulu</i> in this recipe is wild crab apple, <i>Malus</i> spp; we know this from the instructions below for preparing this medication. How are crab apples linked to the sea or to seals? That, we don't know.
ðas .viii. ongan . wið nygon attrum	These 9 go against . nine poisons	
+ wurm com snican toslat lienan .	+ A worm came sneaking it slew nothing .	
Ða genam woden sloh ða þa næddran .viii. wuldor tanas þæt heo on .viii. tofleah	then took Woden slew then the adder 9 wondrous twigs so that she into 9 flew	The number 9 is highly significant in many mythologies. As 3 is a number of perfection, 9 is three 3s, completion. Any number multiplied by nine will have an answer whose digits add up to nine (ex. 3 x 9=27; 2+7=9). The nine "wuldor tanas" are the nine herbs named above.
Ðær geændade æppel 7 attor þæt heo næfre ne wolde on hus bugan	There ended the apple and poison that she never would that house [body]inhabit	

+ fille 7 finule  
fela mihtigu twa þa wyrte  
gesceop witig drihten  
halig on heofonu  
þa he hongode  
sette 7 sænde  
on vii worulde  
earmum 7 eadigum  
eallu to bote  
stond heo wið wærce  
stunað heo wið attre .  
seo mæg  
wið .iii 7 wið xxx .  
wið feondes hond  
7 wið freaþregde  
wið malscrunge  
minra wihta .

+ chervil and fennel  
very mighty these two plants  
created the wise leader  
holy in heaven  
when he hung  
set and sent  
into the 7 worlds  
for wretched and rich  
all to remedy  
stands she against pain  
stands she against poison .  
who is mighty  
against 3 and against 30  
against fiends hand  
against spells  
against enchantment  
by wicked wights.

*Fille*, chervil, *Anthriscus cerefolium*,  
and *finule*, fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare*, members of the same plant family, are found together here.

The wise leader who hung in heaven is most likely Odin All-father, who hung nine days from the World Tree, Yggdrasil, to gain the wisdom that would give him power over the seven worlds: Midgard, Asgard, Vanaheim, Jotunheimr, Alfheimr, Helheimr, and Svartalfheimr

Three and 30 -- again, potent numbers.

+ nu magon þas .viii. wyrta  
wið nygon wuldor  
geflogenum  
wið .viii. attrum  
7 wið nygon onflygnum .

+ Now power have these 9 plants  
against nine who from wonder flee  
against 9 poisons  
and against nine infections .

Repetition is a powerful component of the chant, here emphasizing the potency of the nine herbs against poisons and infections.

wið ðy readan attre  
wið ða runlan attre .  
wið ðy hwitan attre  
wið ðy wedenan attre  
wið ðy geolwan attre .  
wið ðy grenan attre.  
wið ðy wonnan attre  
wið ðy wedenan attre  
wið ðy brunan attre .  
wið ðy basewan attre .

against the red poison  
against the foul poison,  
against the white poison  
against the blue poison  
against the yellow poison .  
against the green poison .  
against the dark poison,  
against the blue poison  
against the brown poison .  
against the purple poison .

It appears that 11 poisons are named, but all are named by color except two, which are described by other aspects -- one is *foul*; the other, *dark* -- so perhaps the author meant a *foul white* poison and a *dark blue* poison, thus giving us 9 poisons.

wið wyrm geblæd  
wið wæter geblæd  
wið þorn geblæd  
wið þys geblæd  
wið ys geblæd  
wið attor geblæd

against worm blister  
against water blister  
against thorn blister  
against thistle blister  
against ice blister  
against poison blister

Six kinds of inflammation are named, each with its cause. The number 6 did not yet have the negative connotations it would acquire in Christian numerology, but unlike 9 it is an "incomplete" number.

gif ænig attor cume eastan  
fleogan  
oððe ænig norðan cume oððe  
ænig westan ofer wer  
ðeode crist stod ofer alde  
ængan cundes .

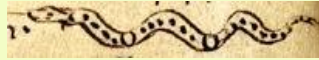
if any poison comes east flying  
or any from north comes or  
any from west over the  
nations of men  
christ stood over illness as  
none other.

It is interesting that the herbs overcome poisons from every direction except the south.

This reference to another god may have been inserted by a Christian scribe to enhance the efficacy of the ritual.

ic ana wat ea rirmende  
7 þa nygon  
nædran behealdað  
motan ealle weoda  
nu wyrta aspringan  
sæs toslupan  
eal sealt wæter  
ðon ic þis attor of ðe geblawe  
.

I alone know running water  
and the nine adders  
hold  
must all weeds  
now as herbs spring up  
seas dissolve  
all salt water  
when I this poison blow  
away .



A nædre, from  
the *Lacnunga*

The adder (*nædre* ) was believed, by analogy, to be the cause of illnesses far beyond those caused by snakebite. But the adder was also revered as a messenger from the underworld, a keeper of secret knowledge, and a protector of treasure. The shed skin of certain snakes could magically endow a person with knowledge of healing.

mucgwyrta wegbrade þe  
eastan open sy .  
lombes cyrse attorlaðan  
mageðan netelan  
wudusuræppel fille 7  
finul ealde sapan gewyrta  
ða wyrta to duste mænge  
wiþ þa sapan 7 wiþ þæs  
æpples gor .

Mugwort waybread the  
east open is.  
lamb's cress attorlothe  
chamomile nettle  
wild sour apple chervil and  
fennel old soap work  
the herbs to dust mix with  
the soap and the  
apple's juice.

The healer now prepares the medication, grinding the plants small and then mixing them with soap and apple juice.

wyrta slypan of wætere  
7 of axsan genim finol wyl  
on þære slyppan 7 beþe mid  
æg gemongc þonne he þa  
sealfe on þe geær geæfter .

work a paste of water  
and of ash take the fennel  
boil  
in the paste and beat with  
water mixes then he the  
salve put on before and after  
.

Water and ash are mixed with fennel, added to the soap mixture, and boiled, all the while stirring.

sing þæt galdor on ælcra  
þara wyrta  
.iii. ær he þy wyrta 7 on  
þone æppel ealswa .  
ond singe þon men in þone  
muð 7 in þa earan buta 7 on  
ða wunde  
þæt ilce gealdor ær he þa  
sealfe on þe :

Sing that charm on each of  
the herbs  
thrice before he prepares  
them and on the apple also .  
and sing into the  
mouth and into both ears  
and on the wound  
that same charm before he  
puts the salve on that :

The charm is repeated throughout preparation and application of the salve, which is used to heal six different kinds of *geblæd*, blisters or skin infections; 6 being an imperfect number, incomplete, and subject to the power of 9.

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