

The Vikings in Britain

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Lindisfarne Priory and Medieval Medicine

Lindisfarne Priory is primarily known for falling victim to Viking raids in 793, at the dawn of the Viking Age. The brutality of this raid horrified the Anglo-Saxon community, which is apparent in several medieval texts. In *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for example, the author writes:

This year came dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians, terrifying the people most woefully: these were immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery, dragons flying across the firmament... in the same year, the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in Holy-Island, by rapine and slaughter (Ingram).

Not only did the monastery succumb to “rapine and slaughter”, but the event was so horrible that it was accompanied by apocalyptic events. Although most likely not meant to be taken literally, the author of the chronicle describes terrifying whirlwinds and fiery, flying dragons over Northumbria during the year of this Viking attack.

Alcuin, a scholar in the court of Charles the Great, also documented this event. In a letter to the Northumbrian king he wrote, “Behold the church of St. Cuthbert spattered with blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan people.” (Lyod 39).

These sources, although focusing mainly on the horrors of the raid, also indicate that Lindisfarne was an important part of the Anglo-Saxon community. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* called it the “Holy-Island” and Alcuin referred to it as “a place more venerable than all in Britain”, both indicating its religious importance.

In accordance with its holiness, Lindisfarne, like several other medieval monasteries, was known as a center for both miracle and medical healing. St. Cuthbert, the bishop of the monastery, healed the sick with his blessings and later, after his death, continued to heal people through his relics. The monastery also contained a hospital for the public (Bonser 95). In accordance with medical practice at that time, the monks would have used techniques such as bloodletting and herbal remedies to heal the sick. Other common practices such as Anglo-Saxon magical healing, however, would have been avoided due to their pagan roots (DuBois 117).

One form of miracle healing used at Lindisfarne was being healed by a living saint. Although Lindisfarne Priory was founded by Saint Aidan in 635, the majority of its saint related healing was done later by its bishop, St. Cuthbert (Lindisfarne Links). In *The Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne*, Bede states that Eata, the Abbot of Melrose, sent Cuthbert to Lindisfarne to “teach the rules of monastic perfection... and illustrate it by the example of his virtue,” (Bede Ch. 16). In displaying his virtue, St. Cuthbert performed an array of healing miracles during his time at Lindisfarne. He did this through touch, consecrated items, prayer, and priests, making him an excellent example of saint healing.

According to Bede, St. Cuthbert healed several people through touch. Two of these cases, in particular, occurred while he was living at Lindisfarne. During an outbreak of the plague, St. Cuthbert came across a mother weeping over her dying son. St. Cuthbert blessed the boy, kissed

him, and said to his mother, “Do not fear nor be sorrowful; for your child shall be healed and live, and no one else of your household shall die of this pestilence.” (Bede Ch. 33). After this, the boy recovered and both he and his mother lived long, happy lives. Later in his life, when Cuthbert himself was near death, he healed another person by touch. Bede recorded one of Cuthbert’s assistants saying to him, “I have a most wonderful thing to tell you: from the moment of my touching the bishop, when I supported him into the oratory, I have been entirely free from my old complaint.” (Bede Ch. 38). The monk, who was suffering from diarrhea, was healed by St. Cuthbert (Bede Ch. 38).

Saint Cuthbert also used blessed and consecrated items to heal the sick at Lindisfarne. In alignment with James 5:14, which reads, “Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord,” Cuthbert used oil to heal (King James Bible, James 5:14). According to Bede, St. Cuthbert healed a nun who “had been troubled with an intolerable pain in the head and side, which the physicians utterly despaired of curing” by anointing her with holy oil (Bede Ch. 30). Bede also records St. Cuthbert using consecrated bread to heal. Prefect Hildemer, who was bedridden and near death, was cured of his illness when St. Cuthbert gave him a cup of water with a piece of consecrated bread inside (Bede Ch. 31).

Lastly, Bede exemplifies St. Cuthbert’s holy prowess by relating several ways in which he was able to cure sickness from afar. In accordance with James 5:15 which reads, “And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up,” St. Cuthbert used prayer to heal (James 5:15). Although Bede records only one instance of St. Cuthbert using prayer to heal during his time at Lindisfarne, he implies that it was a common occurrence. When St. Cuthbert encountered a dying man on the road, Bede writes, “[He] betook himself to his usual weapon,

prayer, and bestowing his blessing, expelled the fever, which all the care and medicines of the physicians had not been able to cure.” (Bede Ch. 32). Bede also records two incidences in which Cuthbert used holy water to heal through another man. In both cases, Cuthbert blessed water and told a priest to give it to a person who was bed ridden and dying. After drinking the water, these people, the wife of an earl and a servant of a king’s attendant, were both healed from illness (Bede Ch. 29, 25).

During this time, and throughout the Viking Age, the cult of the saints had become an important source of miracle healing. St. Augustine and St. Gregory, in particular, had exalted the use of relics in healing; causing an influx of Christian pilgrimages to relic sites (DuBois 118). Consequently, with his strong reputation as a healer, it is not surprising that, after his death, St. Cuthbert’s relics were used to heal various people at Lindisfarne. Although St. Cuthbert’s body was housed in the monastery at Lindisfarne, garments and other objects that had touched his body were responsible for the majority of the relic healings that Bede recorded. Bede, however, justifies this, writing “Even the clothes which had covered his blessed body, whether dead or alive, still possess a healing power.” (Bede Ch. 43).

In the Middle Ages, the Church had a specific order of priests who exorcised devils from people who were possessed by them (Bonser 172). Every day, the exorcists would lay their hands on the possessed and recite a series of prayers prescribed for this purpose (Bonser 172). Despite their training, however, Bede records that priests failed to exorcise a demon from a possessed boy who lived in Lindisfarne. In their desperation, the priests took water from the place where St. Cuthbert’s dead body had been washed and poured it into the boy’s mouth. The boy soon fell asleep and, when he woke up the next day, Bede writes, “[He was] free from his

madness... [and] by the merits and intercession of the blessed Cuthbert, free from the evil spirit by which he had been afflicted.” (Bede Ch. 41).

Bede also recorded an instance in which a man was healed by St. Cuthbert’s shoes. A man who suffered from “a weakness which the Greeks call paralysis” came to the hospital at Lindisfarne monastery in hopes that the physicians there could cure him (Bede Ch. 45). The doctors, however, were unsuccessful and the man became so paralyzed that only his mouth could move. Eventually, he asked for something of St. Cuthbert’s and his attendant put St. Cuthbert’s shoes on his feet; “for it was in his feet that the palsy had first attacked him.” (Bede Ch. 45). The next day, the man was cured and gave thanks to God.

Although St. Cuthbert was the most famous saint from Lindisfarne, he was not the only saint to have healing relics stored in Lindisfarne Priory. According to Bede, Cuthbert’s successor, St. Eadfrid, “a man equally devoted to the Lord” also had relics (Bede Ch. 46). One of his relics, a calfskin used to muffle wind while he prayed, healed his successor, Felgeld, from a skin disease. This disease, in light of Bede’s in-depth description, was most likely erysipelas, a streptococcal skin infection. Erysipelas, which can be traced back to the Middle Ages, went under the name “St. Anthony’s Fire” by the eleventh century (Bratton). When left untreated, the disease worsens and sometimes forms an abscess, which was apparently the case with Felgeld (Bratton). Felgeld, however, experience miracle healing when he washed his swollen face with St. Eadfrid’s calfskin and his affliction disappeared.

Along with miracle healing, Lindisfarne Priory was also a large supporter of medical healing. Most of the Anglo-Saxon hospitals that were established in the Middle Ages were not connected to monastic establishments (Bonser 96). This may have been because, in the Middle

Ages, the church had a difficult relationship with classical medicine. Although most believed that medical healing was effective, they were unsure if it should be utilized by the church. Some leaders eventually forbade their priests from studying medicine, believing that faith alone should suffice in healing the sick (DuBois 117). Despite this controversy, however, the monks at Lindisfarne Priory ran a hospital, using classical medicine to heal the sick (Bonser 96). Due to their public hospital, as Bede records on multiple occasions, people traveled to Lindisfarne to receive medical treatment (Bede Ch. 45).

Bloodletting was the most common form of medical healing in the Middle Ages (Bonser 294). In regards to other types of medical healing, such as herbal remedies, it also seemed to be the most widely accepted by the church. Although there are few, if any, records of the procedures performed at Lindisfarne Priory, the physicians, in respect to other monastic doctors at the time, would have used treatments such as bloodletting on their patients. In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, for example, he recounts an incident in which St. John of Beverly instructed nuns on the proper way to bleed a patient. One nun, who was very ill, had an arm that was swollen and painful from being bled. St. John said that her arm was swollen because she was bleeding during the fourth day of the moon, which was dangerous due to the increase in moonlight and ocean tides (Bonser 297). Another tie between bloodletting and the church is seen through St. Cassius. According to Wilfrid Bonser, "Saint Cassius was the patron saint of patients undergoing venesection," implying that bloodletting was widely accepted by the church (Bonser 296).

Bloodletting is based on the idea that the body is made up of four humors; blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile (Krzywicka). For medieval Anglo-Saxons, including the physicians at Lindisfarne Priory, bloodletting was a way of expelling evil humors from the body,

which would consequently cure a disease (Bonser 295). If a doctor decided to use bloodletting, he would open the vein that was associated with curing his patient's specific ailment. Although the physicians were particular about this aspect, they often overlooked other factors such as the current condition of their patient. Because of this, patients who were already severely debilitated must have died from this treatment (Bonser 294-5).

The physicians at Lindisfarne Priory would have also used herbal remedies to cure their patients. Although herbal remedies, by themselves, were not seen as evil, the church had to separate these remedies from the Anglo-Saxon plant magic that was traditionally associated with them. For example, to retain the virtue of a plant, a pagan would draw a magic circle around the base of a plant. In Christian times, however, this was replaced by praying for the plant's preservation. Similarly, pagan plant gathering traditions such as the summer solstice were replaced by The Night of Saint John (Bonser 316).

Besides Anglo-Saxon medicines and traditions, one of the main sources for Christian herbal remedies was Apuleius's classical book, *Herbarium* (DuBois 94). If there wasn't a copy of this book at Lindisfarne Priory, the monks were at least familiar with some of its remedies. Apuleius's cures focus mainly on chronic pains such as toothaches, aching bones, and headaches. He also listed dozens of remedies for other ailments, including urinary and gastrointestinal irregularities, dropsy, bladder ailments, and eye problems (DuBois 94). More common problems, however, such as burns, wounds, and fevers, which the monks at Lindisfarne likely encountered daily, were given less attention in Apuleius's *Herbarium*. Nevertheless, the few treatments that Apuleius gave for these ailments would have been utilized at Lindisfarne Priory. A wrap of halswort (*Campanula trachelium*), flour, and oil would have been used to treat wounds, while a mixture of celandine (*Chelidonium maius*) and goat's cheese would have been applied to burns

(DuBois 95). The monks may have also utilized some of Apuleius's less conventional treatments. To cure a persistent fever, for example, it was recommended that lettuce was secretly laid under the patient's pillow (DuBois 95).

Christianized magical medicine may have also been used in the earlier years of Lindisfarne Priory. When the Anglo-Saxons were first converted to Christianity, many of them wanted to continue to use Anglo-Saxon charms and magic. Because this was unacceptable in the Christian community, they decided to Christianize these practices; substituting the Christian God, saints, and narratives into their charms (DuBois 116). Other, similar practices included wearing amulets to promote health. Although Christians weren't supposed to wear traditional, Anglo-Saxon amulets, several bishops were known for practicing similar superstitions (Bonser 232). In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, for example, Bede mentions that St. Germanus wore a casket of Christian relics around his neck (Bonser 232). In Lindisfarne Priory, however, these practices would have been quelled once St. Cuthbert began to reside there. Before he came to Lindisfarne, St. Cuthbert fought against the newly Christianized Northumbrians, telling them not to resort to Christianized magic (DuBois 117). Bede writes, in response to Cuthbert's struggle with the Northumbrians, "Many of them, indeed, disgraced the faith which they professed, by unholy deeds; and some of them, in the time of mortality, neglecting the sacrament of their creed, had recourse to idolatrous remedies, as if by charms or amulets, or any other mysteries of the magical art, they were able to avert a stroke inflicted upon them by the Lord." (Bede Ch. 9). St. Cuthbert was held in high regard at Lindisfarne and, presumably, his monks would have followed his example.

Although Lindisfarne Priory had been a center for medical and miracle healing for over two hundred years, and had previously survived a Viking attack; it was ultimately destroyed in

875 (Halsall). During this second Viking attack, the Lindisfarne monks gathered up the relics of St. Cuthbert and abandoned the priory. Today, the remains of Lindisfarne Priory still stand, a shell of its previous glory.

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