

# 2. Old English I

The History of English (Ling 390)

Prof. Pentangelo

Fall 2025

# Quiz #1

1. When the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes first came to Britain, where did they come from?
2. After the Anglo-Saxons settled in England, what were their relations like with the Vikings?

# What We'll Cover

1. Quiz #1
2. Early Days of Post-Roman England (Reading Review)
3. Old English Orthography
4. Some Old English Texts
5. For Next Time

# Early Days of Post-Roman England

- When was Old English spoken?
- Who were the Anglo-Saxons?
- Who were the Vikings?
- Who were the Scandinavians?
- Who spoke Old English?
- Who spoke Old Norse?
- What is “mutual intelligibility”?



“The Scandinavian tongues of those days were enough like Old English to make communication possible between the English and the Danes who were their neighbors. [...] Old English and Old Norse (the language of the Scandinavians) had a whole host of frequently used words in common, among others, *man, wife, mother, folk, house, thing, winter, summer, will, can, come, hear, see, think, ride, over, under, mine, and thine.*” (p.84)

# Early Days of Post-Roman England



Silver penny showing Alfred the Great, c.875–880 AD

- Who was Alfred the Great?
- What was the Danelaw?
- Where was the Danelaw?
- Why there?
- What was *Beowulf*?



Map of England, including the Danelaw, in 886 AD

# Early Days of Post-Roman England

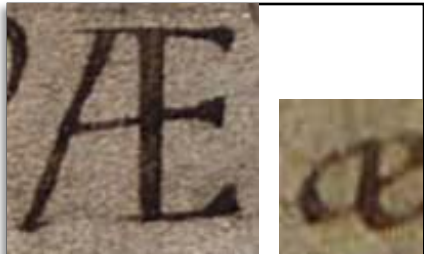
- Who was Bede?
- Why were monasteries the great centers of learning in England?
- How many dialects of Old English were there, and what were they?
- In which of these were most manuscripts (and virtually everything with any literary merit) written?



The venerable Bede as depicted in a 12th-century manuscript

# Old English Orthography

- Your reading for next week goes into this in more detail, but you need some information now to be able to engage with primary texts.
- Four letters that we don't use in Modern English that you must know – with images from the Beowulf manuscript – and one symbol:



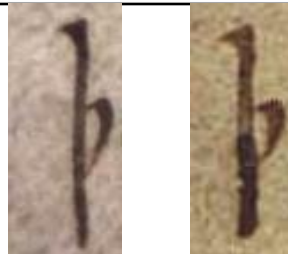
Called “ash,” this represented the sound of the ‘a’ in ‘cat.’

[æ]    Æ, æ



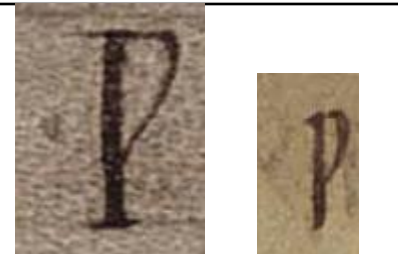
The letter “eth” was the ‘th’ sound in either ‘then’ or ‘thin.’

[ð] or [θ]    Ð, ð



Taken from Futhorc, “thorn” represented the same sounds as eth.

[ð] or [θ]    þ, ð



Also from Futhorc, “wynn” represented the ‘w’ sound in ‘wood.’

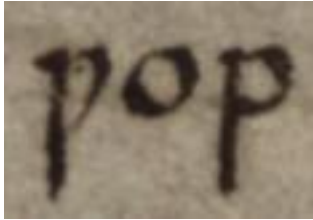
[w]    ƿ, ƿ



And this one meant “and,” like the ampersand does today.

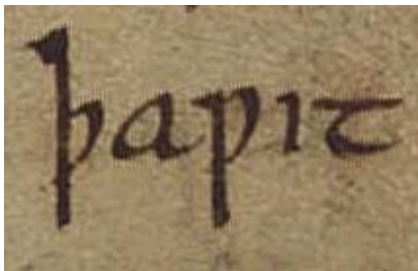
[and]    ⁊

- Wynn and p can be distinguished by how the curve connects to the stem.



“wop”  
weeping

- And both can be distinguished from thorn, which has a very long ascender and descender.



“tha wit”  
as we (two)

þ p p þ

# Insular Hand

- Other letters were shaped differently from those we're now familiar with. More on this next week, but some stuff you'll see before then:



'g' had a flat top



lowercase s was long, like a lowercase f without the line



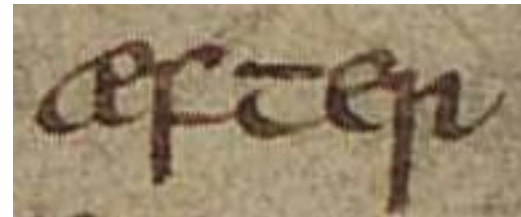
It could look like a long lowercase r



lowercase t did not have a tall stem

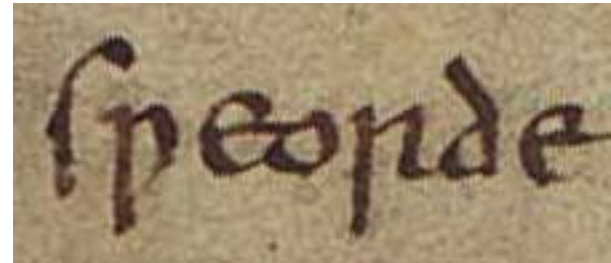


lowercase r descended below the line, like p



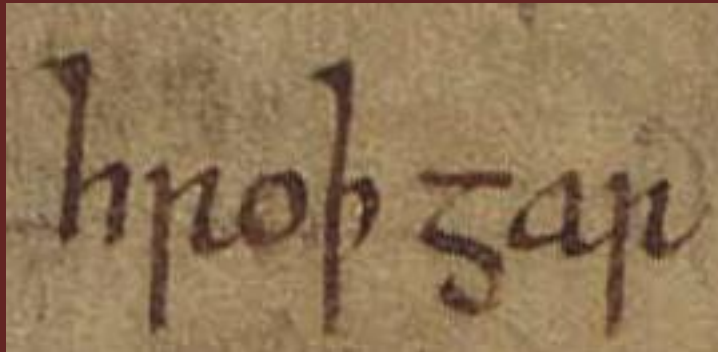
æfter

'after'



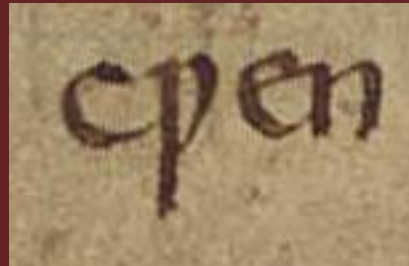
sweorde

'sword'



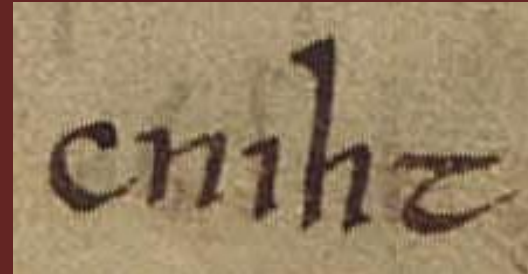
Hrothgar

'glory-spear'



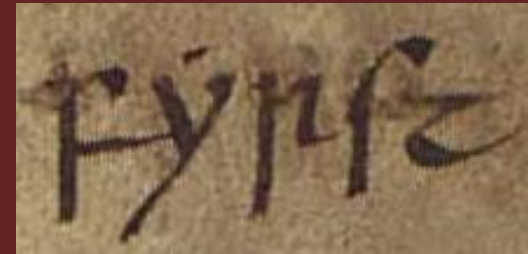
cwen

queen



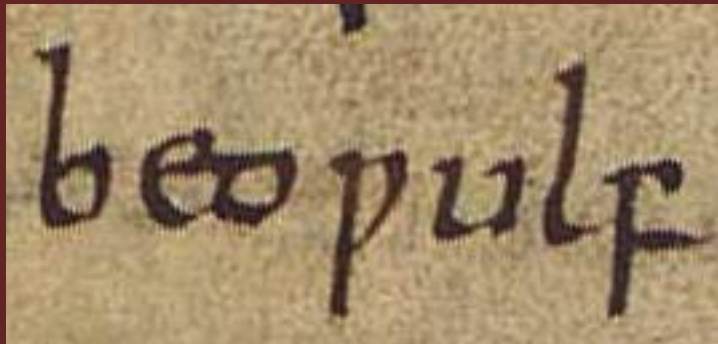
cniht

knight



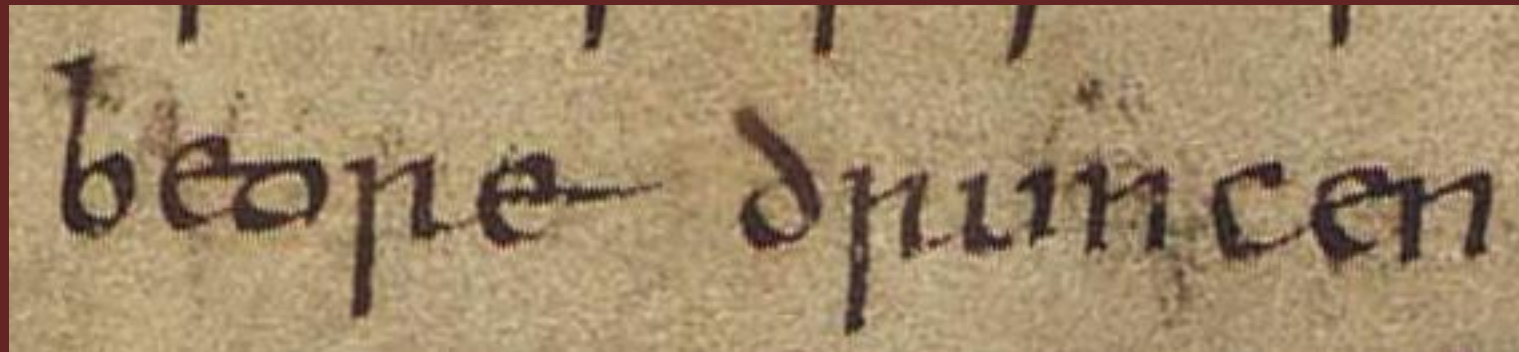
fyrst

first



Beowulf

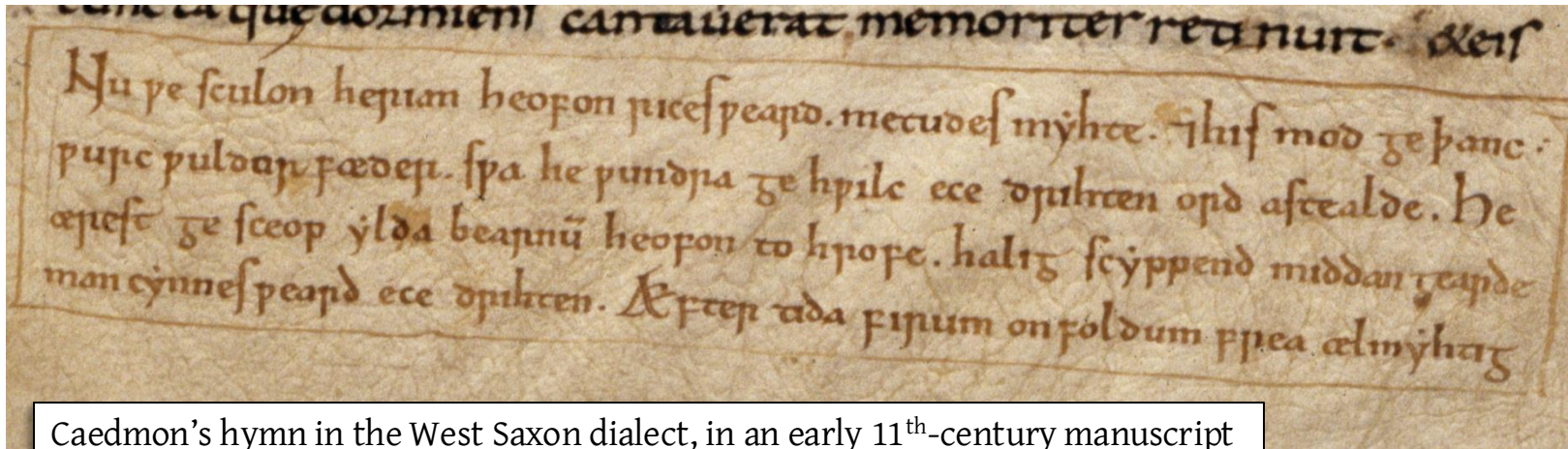
'bee-wolf'



beore druncen

'beer-drunk'

# Caedmon's Hymn



- The earliest poem in Old English, Bede reports that an illiterate cowherder named Caedmon wrote this hymn some time between 658 and 680 AD.
- It is alliterative rather than rhyming, like much early Germanic poetry.

# Caedmon's Hymn

“The story goes that Caedmon, who was employed by the monastery of Whitby, invariably fled when it was his turn to sing during a merry social feast. He was ashamed he had never had any songs to contribute. But one night a voice came to Caedmon in a dream and asked him to sing a song. When Caedmon responded that he had no idea how to sing, the voice commanded him to sing about the source of all created things (“Sing to me the beginning of all things”). “Thereupon,” as the monk known as the Venerable Bede tells it in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731), “Caedmon began to sing verses which he had never heard before in praise of God the creator.”  
— Edward Hirsch, *Image* 96 [[source](#)]



The ruins of Whitby Abbey, in Northumbria, where Caedmon once tended the animals.

# Activity!

- Break up into **four groups**. You and your groupmates will work together on the reading assignment for next time. You will also work together for most in-class assignments.
- Let's do line 1 of the activity sheet all together.  
    Nu ꝥe ꝑsculon heꝥian      heoꝝon ꝥices ꝥeaꝥð  
    Nu we sculon herian      heofon rices weard
- Now, work with your groups to transcribe the rest of Caedmon's Hymn.

Nu we sculon herian  
metudes myhte  
wurc wuldar faeder  
ece drihten  
He aereft gesceop  
heofon to hrofe  
middan gearde  
ece drihten .  
firum on foldum

heofon rices weard  
7 his mod gehanc  
swa he wundra gehwilc  
ord astealde.  
ylda bearnum  
halig scyppend  
man cynnes weard  
Æfter tida  
frea ælmyhtig

Nu we sculon herian  
metudes myhte  
wurc wuldar faeder  
ece drihten  
He aereft gesceop  
heofon to hrofe  
middan gearde  
ece drihten .  
firum on foldum

heofon rices weard  
& his mod gethanc  
swa he wundra gehwilc  
ord astealde.  
ylda bearnum  
halig scyppend  
man cynnes weard  
Aefer tida  
frea aelmyhtig

Which of these Old English words seem like their Modern English descendants?

Now we should praise  
maker's might  
work of the glory father  
eternal Lord  
He first shaped  
heaven as a roof  
middle-earth  
eternal Lord  
solid ground for men

Heaven-Kingdom's guardian  
and his mind's thoughts  
as each of his wonders  
established a beginning.  
for the children of men  
the holy maker  
mankind's guardian  
after made  
Lord almighty.

Nu we sculon herian  
metudes myhte  
wurc wuldar faeder  
ece drihten  
He aereft gesceop  
heofon to hrofe  
middan gearde  
ece drihten .  
firum on foldum

heofon rices weard  
7 his mod gethanc  
swa he wundra gehwilt  
ord astealde.  
ylda bearnum  
halig scyppend  
man cynnes weard  
Æfter tida  
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Nu we sculon herian  
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ece drihten  
He aereft gesceop  
heofon to hrofe  
middan gearde  
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firum on foldum

heofon rices weard  
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ylda bearnum  
halig scyppend  
man cynnes weard  
Aefer tida  
frea aelmyhtig

Which of these Old English words seem like their Modern English descendants?

nu we heofon myhte his wurc

faeder wundra He heofon hrofe

halig man cynnes Aefer

aelmyhtig

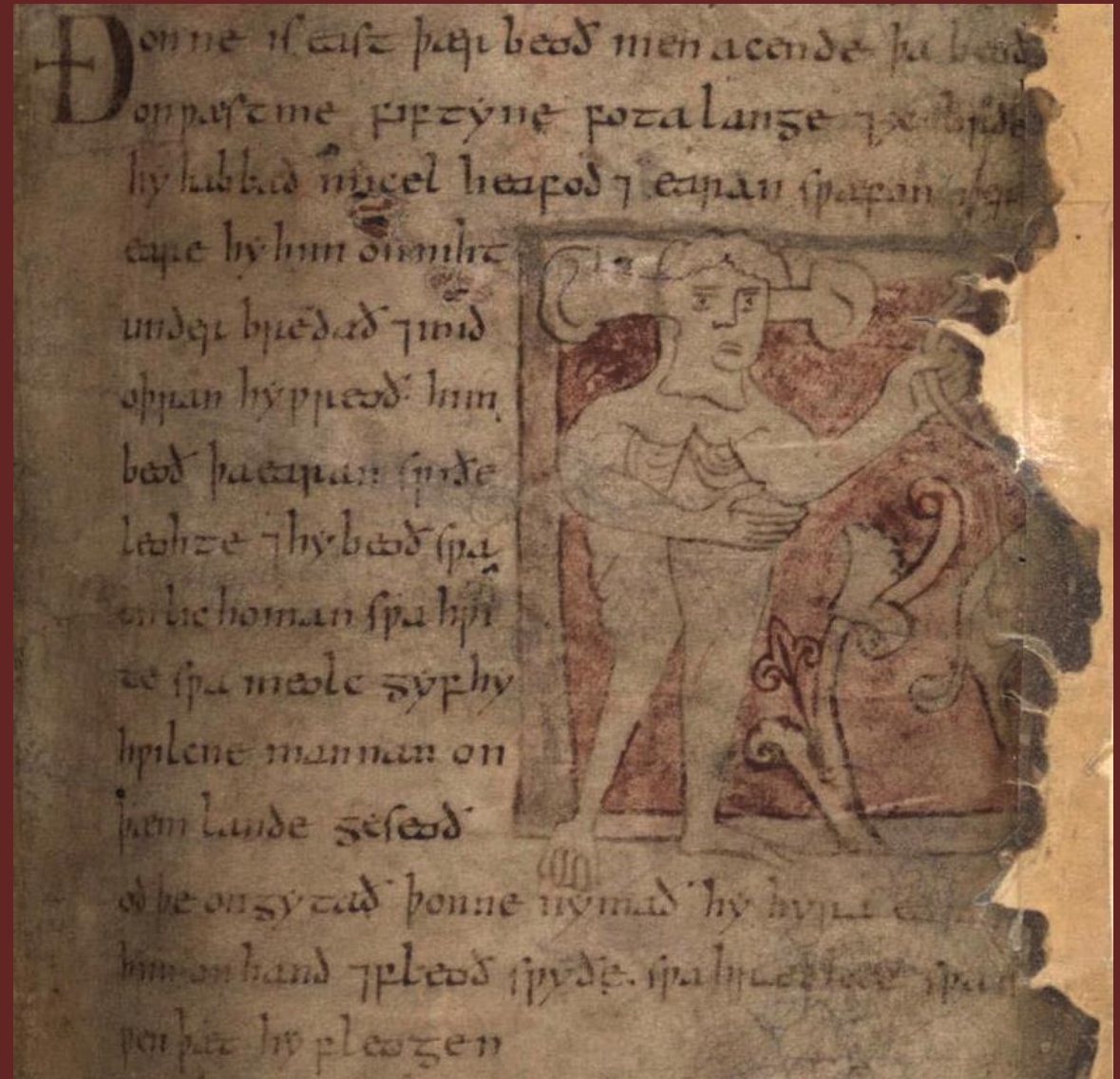
(and more...)

Now we should praise  
maker's might  
work of the glory father  
eternal Lord  
He first shaped  
heaven as a roof  
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solid ground for men

Heaven-Kingdom's guardian  
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established a beginning.  
for the children of men  
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mankind's guardian  
after made  
Lord almighty.

# Activity!

- *Wonders of the East* is a marvelous work of misinformed travel literature that appears in the Nowell Codex along with *Beowulf*.
- In your groups, now do question 2 on your sheets.

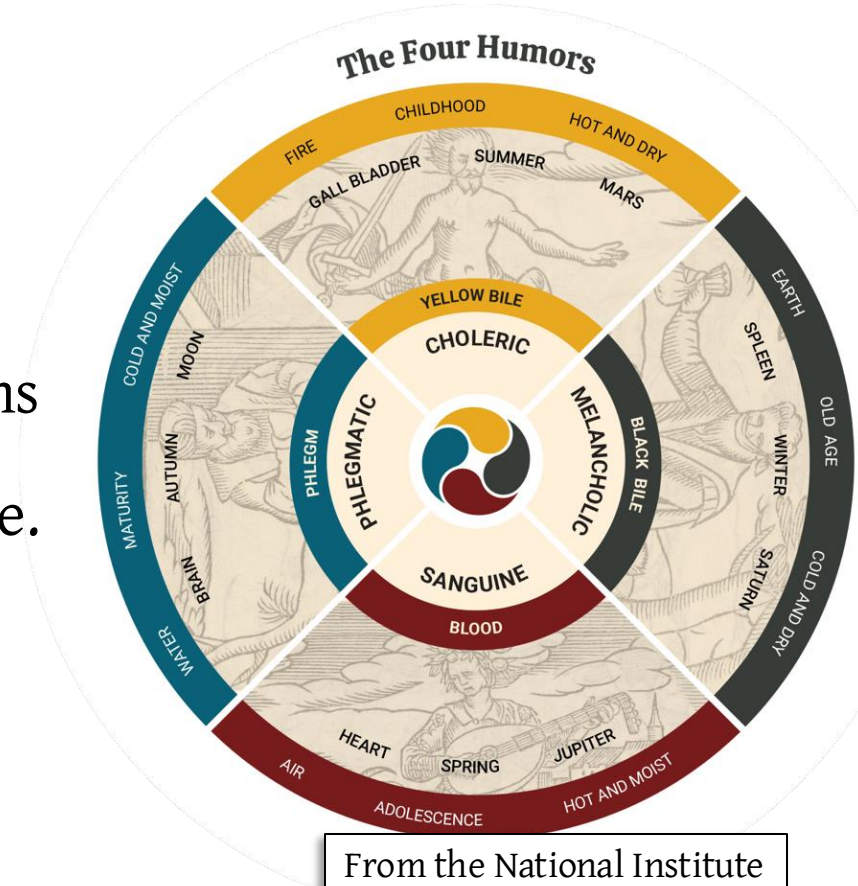


þonne iſ eaſt þær beoð men acende  
þa beoð on ƿæſtme ƿiſtýne ƿota  
lange 7 x on brade. Hý habbað mícel  
heafoð 7 earan ſƿæ ƿon. Oþer eare  
hý him on niht underbreaðað, 7 mid  
oþran hý ƿreoð him. Beoð þa earan  
ſƿiðe leohte 7 hý beoð ſƿa on lic  
homan ſƿa hƿite ſƿa meolc. ðýf hý  
hƿilcne mannan on þæm lande  
geſeoð oðþe ongytað, þonne nýmað  
hý hýra earan him on hand 7 ƿleoð  
ſƿýðe, ſƿa hƿædlece ſƿa iſ ƿen þæt  
hý ƿleozen.

Going east from there is a place  
where people are born who are in  
size fifteen feet tall and ten broad.  
They have large heads and ears like  
fans. They spread one ear beneath  
them at night, and they wrap  
themselves with the other. Their  
ears are very light and their bodies  
are as white as milk. If they see or  
perceive anyone in those lands, they  
take their ears in their hands and go  
far and flee, so swiftly one might  
think that they flew.

# Medieval Medicine

- From the Classical era up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans believed in **humoralism**, a system of medicine that prioritized balance between the body's four humors, i.e. bodily fluids.
- Each humor had an associated organ, temperament, season, and element. Astrology was part of this too.
- If the humors fell out of balance, disease would result.
- This form of medicine predominated throughout the Islamic world as well, through Avicenna's *The Canon of Medicine* (1025).
- We didn't know how diseases really spread until very recently, and there's plenty we still don't understand.



From the National Institute of Health, based on *Opticke Glasse of Humors* by Thomas Walkington (1639).



- Most medieval medical treatises were written in Latin. Why?
- That said, there were a number of important ones written in English, including **Bald's Leechbook**, **Leechbook III**, and the **Lacnunga**.
- The English ones contain recipes for medicines and salves, as well as a few magical charms, which reveal a lot about the pagan beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons.
- We'll work with a couple of these in class next week.

# Bald's Leechbook

(mid-10<sup>th</sup> century)

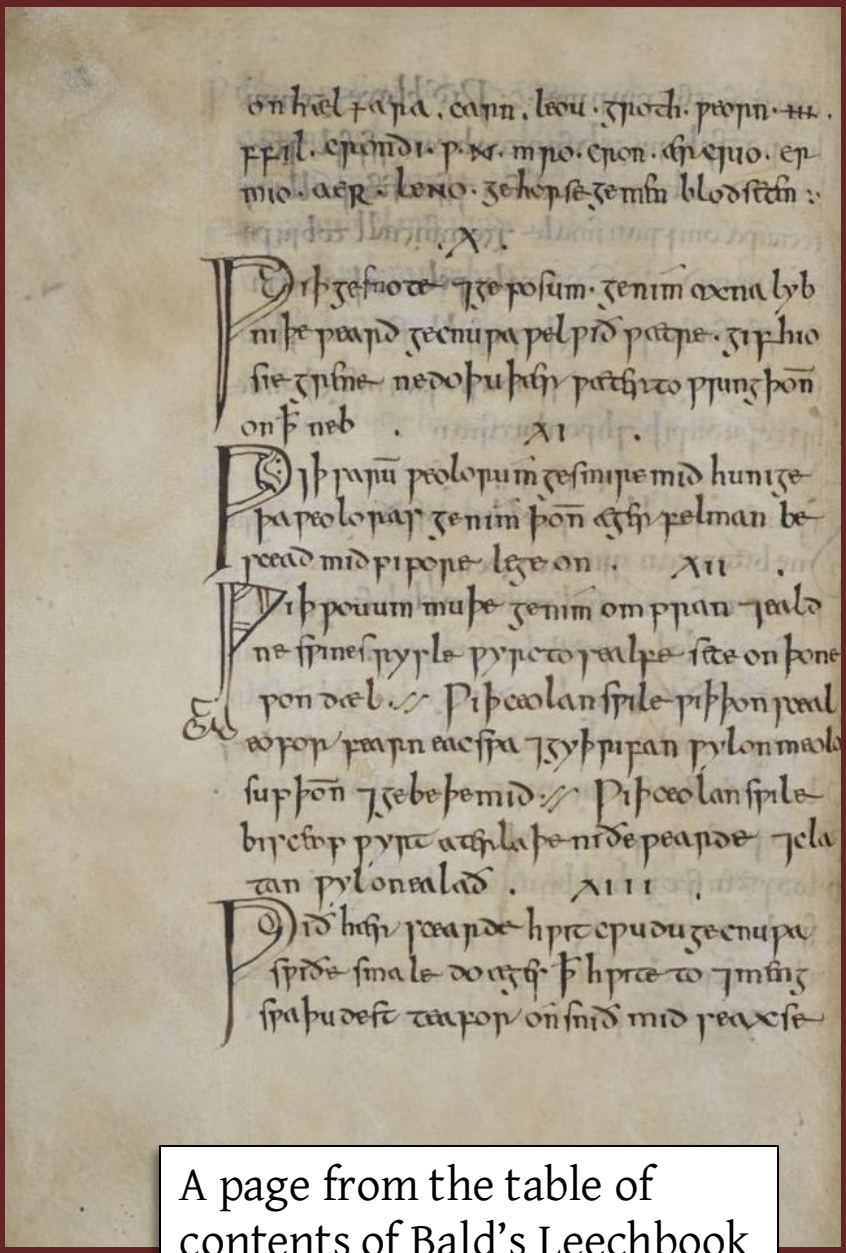


Leeches today

Old English *læce* 'physician, healer'  
from Proto-Germanic *\*lēkijaz* 'doctor'



Leeches then

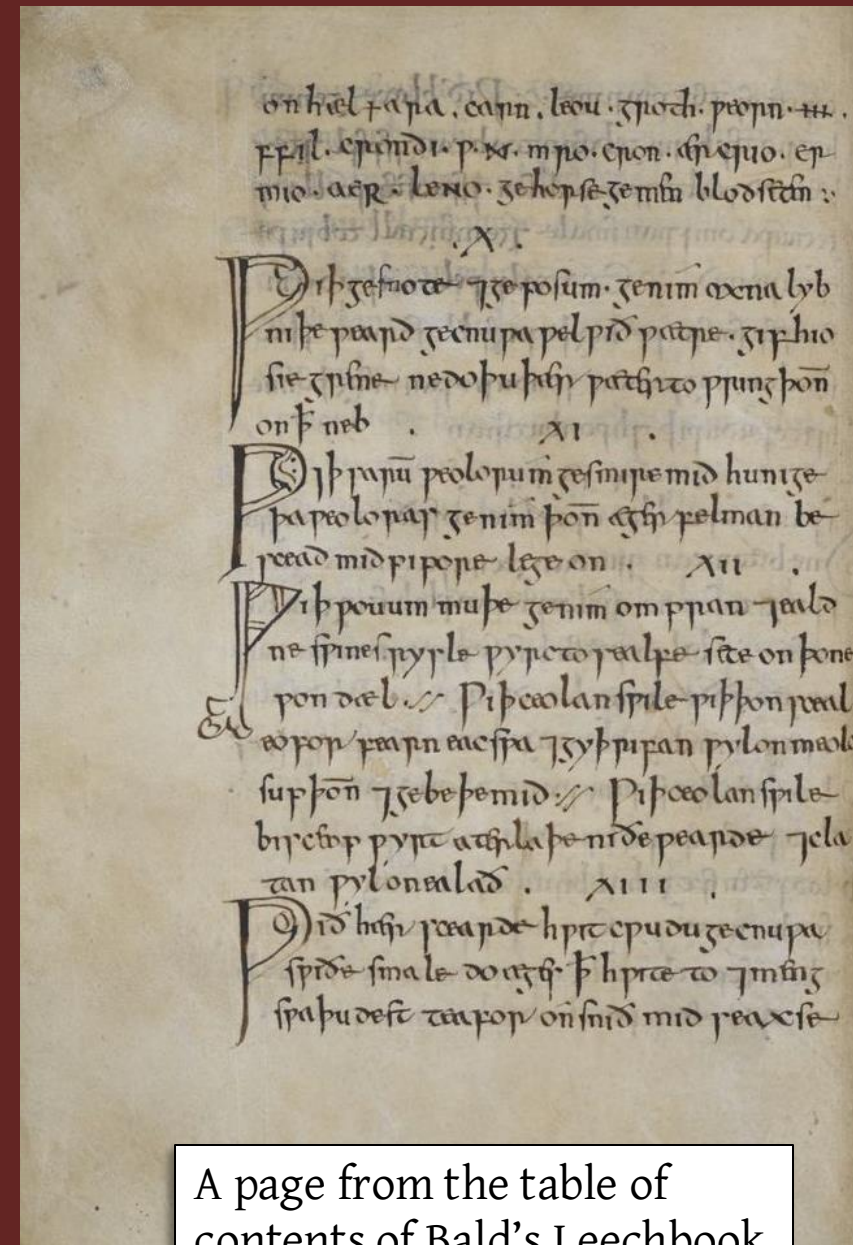


A page from the table of contents of Bald's Leechbook

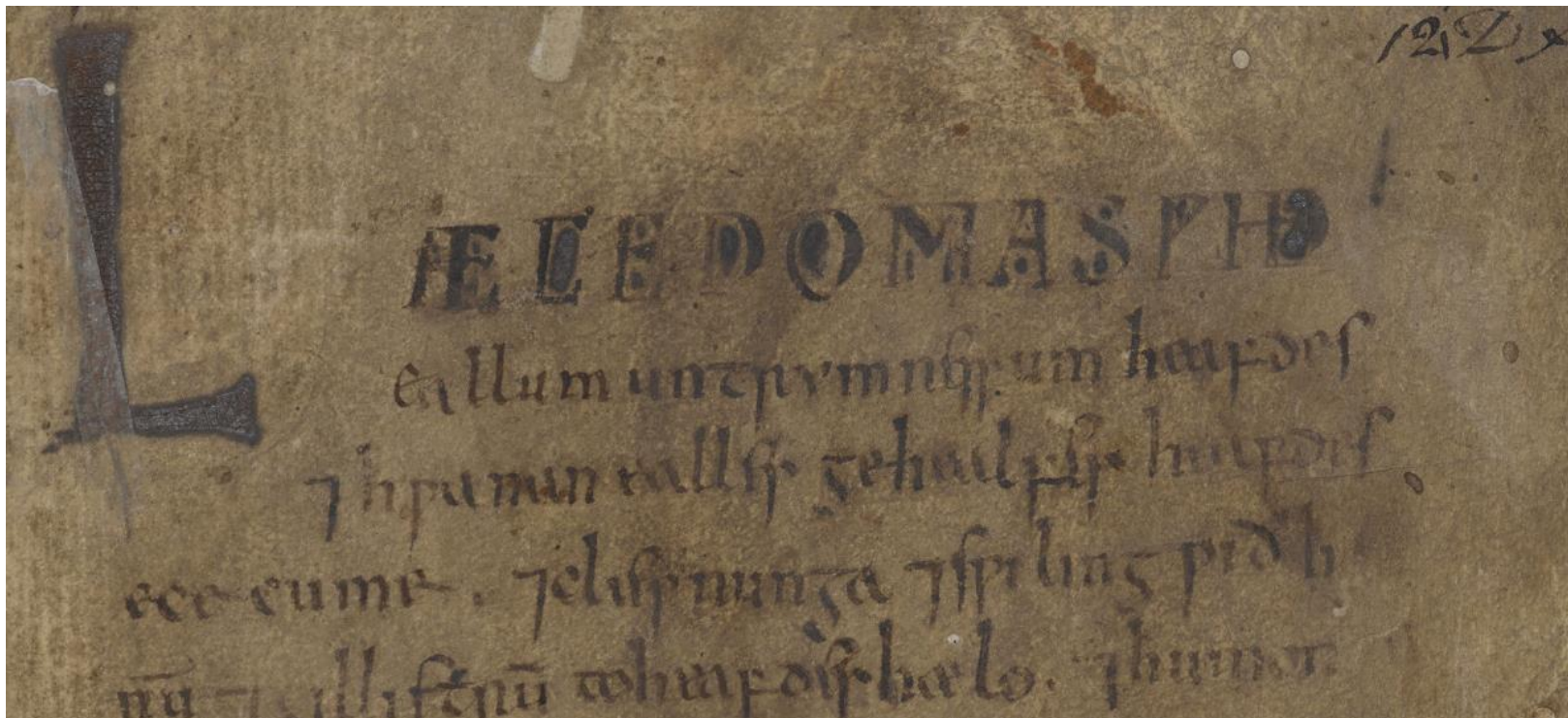
# Bald's Leechbook

(mid-10<sup>th</sup> century)

- Bald's Leechbook is more cosmopolitan and less folklore-infused than the Lacnunga.
- From the British Library, "Bald's *Leechbook* contains some of the best Mediterranean medicine from the 3rd to the 9th centuries, so the learning was by no means isolated. While some of the herbs mentioned in the texts were only available around the Mediterranean, there are directions for the use of *materia medica* traded from distant areas, frankincense, pepper, silk, ginger and myrrh."



A page from the table of contents of Bald's Leechbook



**LÆCEDOMAS ƿIÐ**

eallum untrymnessum heafdes  
[...]

**LAECEDOMAS WITH**

eallum untrymnessum heafdes

Leechdoms against  
all infirmities of the head

leechdom = medical remedy

# Activity!

- In groups, do activity 3 on your sheets.

ƿyrc eaƷrealfe ƿiþ ƿænne  
Ʒenim cƿopleac 7 Ʒarpleac  
beƷea em feala  
Ʒecnupa ƿel toromne  
Ʒenim ƿin 7 feaƿnef Ʒeallan beƷea  
em feala  
ƷemenƷ ƿiþ þy leace  
do þonne on aƿfaet  
laet ſtandan niƷon niht  
on þam aƿfaete  
aƿƿinƷ þuþh claþ  
7 Ʒehlyttre ƿel do on horn .  
7 ymb niht do mið feþere  
on þe eage ſe beƿta læcedom.

Work an eyesalve for a wen  
take cropleak and garlic  
of both equal quantities  
pound well together  
take wine and bullock's gall  
of both equal quantities  
mix it with the leek  
put this then into a brass vessel  
let it stand nine nights  
in the brass vessel  
wring through cloth  
and clear well put into a horn .  
and around night apply with feather  
on the eye the best remedy

Ʒync eazrealfe Ʒiþ Ʒænne  
Ʒenim cƷopleac 7 Ʒanleac  
beƷea em feala  
Ʒecnupa Ʒel toromne  
Ʒenim Ʒin 7 feapnef Ʒeallan beƷea  
em feala  
ƷemenƷ Ʒiþ þy leace  
do þonne on aƷfæt  
læt ſtandan niƷon niht  
on þam aƷfate  
aƷƷinƷ þuþh claþ  
7 Ʒehlyttre Ʒel do on horn .  
7 ymb niht do mid feþere  
on þ eaze ſe betta læcedom.

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and around night apply with feather  
on the eye the best remedy

# A 1,000-Year-Old Antimicrobial Remedy with Antistaphylococcal Activity

Authors: Freya Harrison, Aled E. L. Roberts, Rebecca Gabriliska, Kendra P. Rumbaugh, Christina Lee, Stephen P. Diggle | [AUTHORS INFO &](#)

[AFFILIATIONS](#)

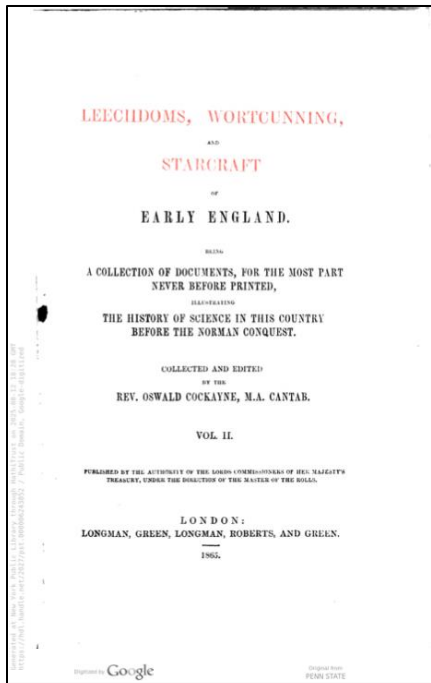
<https://doi.org/10.1128/mbio.01129-15> • [Check for updates](#)

63 / 84,054

## DISCUSSION

In summary, we have reconstituted a 1,000-year-old remedy for bacterial infection and shown that it kills the most common cause of the infection it was designed to treat. Bald's eyesalve eliminates *S. aureus* in planktonic culture and reduces viable cell numbers by several orders of magnitude in a synthetic model of established biofilm infection. This effect depends upon the combination of several ingredients and upon the 9-day storage period specified in the recipe. Furthermore, a highly antibiotic-resistant strain of *S. aureus* is susceptible to Bald's eyesalve when infected tissue from a mouse chronic wound model is exposed to the recipe. In this model, significant bactericidal activity was observed after a brief period of exposure during which the current last-line clinical antibiotic (vancomycin) did not kill significant numbers of bacteria. Our findings contrast with those of a

In short: the remedy you just read really works, as long as the instructions in the Leechbook are followed.



Your readings for the next couple of weeks will include excerpts from a modern (19<sup>th</sup>-century) transcription and translation of Bald's Leechbook by Rev. Oswald Cockayne. The work uses facing-page translations.

50 LÆCE BOC.

zeblezenaðre tungan sīpleaƿe . ʒ hrembel leaƿ pyl on  
pætere haƿa lange on muðe ʒ zelome. ʒif monneƿ  
opað sie ful zenim beren mela ʒoð . ʒ clæne huniƿ ʒ  
hƿit fealt zemenƿ eall tofomne ʒ ʒnib þa teþ mið  
sƿiðe ʒ zelome. :

.VI.

Læcedomaƿ siþ toð pænce ʒ siþ ƿƿymūm ʒe siþ þam  
uƿeran toðece ʒe siþ þam<sup>1</sup> niþeran. :

<sup>1</sup> Herbar.  
Apul. i. 8.      Siþ toþ pænce .<sup>a</sup> betonicaƿ feoð on ƿine oþ þƿuddan  
ðel sƿile þonne ʒeond þone muð lange hƿile. :

fol. 19 a.      Sið toþ pænce ʒif ƿƿym ete . zenim ealb holen læaƿ  
ʒ heopot cƿop neoþeƿearðne ʒ ƿaluian uƿeƿearðe beƿyl  
cƿƿ ðæl on pætere ʒeot ðn bollan ʒ ʒeona ymb þonne  
feallað þa ƿƿymaƿ ðn þone bollan. ʒif ƿƿym ete þa  
teð zenim oƿer ʒeare holen ƿinde ʒ eoƿor þƿotan  
moƿan ƿel on sƿa hatum<sup>2</sup> haƿa on muðe sƿa hat sƿa  
þu hatofe mæƿe. Siþ toð ƿƿymum zenim sƿe mela ʒ  
beolonan ƿæð ʒ ƿeax ealƿa em ƿela menƿ tosomne  
ƿƿƿe to ƿeax candelle . ʒ bærn læt ƿeocan on þone  
muð ðo hlæc hƿæƿl under þonne feallaþ þa ƿƿymaƿ  
ðn. :

Sið toþ pænce ʒebærn hƿit fealt ʒ ʒaƿleāc beƿec on  
ʒledum ʒebƿæð ʒ berenð ʒ ƿiƿor ʒ sƿaælƿƿƿe ʒeƿnib  
eal tofomne leƿe ðn. :

Siþ toþ pænce hƿeƿneƿ ƿot ƿel on ƿine neoþeƿearðne  
oððe on eceðe ƿƿ sƿa ðu hatofe mæƿe. Siþ toðpænce

---

ƿiðā, MS.      |      <sup>2</sup> harum ƿæƿe ?

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LEECH BOOK. I. 51

salve and for a blained tongue, boil in water fivelcaf,  
*that is, cinquefoil*, and bramble leaves, have it long in  
the mouth and frequently. If a mans breath be foul,  
take good barley meal and clean honey and white  
salt,<sup>1</sup> mingle all together, and rub the teeth with it  
much and frequently.

vi.

1. Leechdoms for sharp pain in the teeth and for  
worms, either for the upper tooth ache or for the  
nether.

2. For tooth wark, seethe betony in wine to the  
third part, then swill the mouth thoroughly for a long  
while.

3. For tooth wark, if a worm eat *the tooth*, take an  
old holly leaf and one of the lower umbels of hart-  
wort,<sup>2</sup> and the upward *part of* sage, boil two doles<sup>3</sup>  
in water, pour into a bowl and yawn over it, then the  
worms shall fall into the bowl. If a worm eat the  
teeth, take holly rind over a year old, and root of  
carline thistle, boil in so hot *water*? hold in the mouth  
as hot as thou hottest may. For tooth worms, take  
acorn meal and henbane seed and wax, of all equally  
much, mingle *these* together, work into a wax candle,  
and burn it, let it reek into the mouth, put a black  
cloth under, then will the worms fall on it.

4. For tooth wark, burn white salt and garlic,  
make them smoke on gledes, roast and tear to pieces,  
and *add* pepper and clubmoss, rub all together and  
lay on.

5. For tooth wark, boil in wine or in vinegar the  
netherward part of ravens foot,<sup>4</sup> sup as thou hottest  
may. For tooth wark, bray together to dust rind

---

<sup>1</sup> That is, the best, purest salt.      |      <sup>2</sup> That is, two of worts to one of  
<sup>2</sup> *Seeli*; perhaps, however, Hart-      |      water.  
bramble, *Rhamnus*, may be meant.      |      <sup>3</sup> *Ranunculus ficaria*.

D 2

Book I.  
Ch. v.

# For next time

- Read pp.86–96 in the Algeo textbook.
- There will be a quiz on this reading at the start of our next class on September 29<sup>th</sup>.
- Read from Cockayne as follows:
  - Group 1: pp.50–59 (leechdoms VI through XV)
  - Group 2: pp.58–67 (leechdoms XVI through XXV)
  - Group 3: pp.110–121 (leechdoms XLIV through XLVII)
  - Group 4: pp.120–129 (leechdoms XLVIII through LVIII)
- You'll discuss your reading with the class. What diseases are treated here? As you read, identify five Old English words that are recognizable to you. In what ways have they changed from Old English to today?

If you don't like the downloadable file, try this link:  
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