

## THE PHYSICIAN IN ENGLISH HISTORY

THE first physician mentioned in English history is Cynifrid, who appears in the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* of Bede. The passage in which his name occurs and in which his very words are quoted deserves consideration. He was present at the death of Etheldreda abbess of Ely and at her disinterment sixteen years later. He used to tell that when ill she had a great swelling under the jaw. "They bid me," he said, "to cut that swelling so that the hurtful humour which was therein might flow out. When I did it she seemed for two days somewhat better, so that many thought that she might recover from her weakness. But on the third day she was attacked by her

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former pains, and being snatched from the world changed pain and death for everlasting health and life.” He goes on to describe the uncovering of the saint’s body sixteen years later. She lay as if asleep. The bystanders “pointed out to me the wound of the incision, which I had made, cured ; so that in a wonderful way instead of an open and gaping wound with which she was buried there appeared very slender traces of a scar.” Had we been present we should probably have thought that the incision had thoroughly drained the abscess and that the edges of the wound had fallen together. What was the nature of the swelling? A remark which immediately follows Cynifrid’s description shows that the swelling was not an incident of an acute disease but had existed for some time in the saint’s neck. “She was much delighted with this kind of illness and used to say ‘ I know truly that I ought to bear the weight of disease

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in my neck in which I mind me that in my girlhood I used to carry the useless burden of necklaces, and I believe that therefore Providence wills that I should suffer pain in my neck that thus I may be cleared from the accusation of vanity when now for gold and pearls the redness and heat of a swelling stand out in my neck.’” These are the words and meditations of a patient who has long had a suppurating swelling in the neck and such a swelling is rarely other than tuberculous. The words “*ac solita dicere*” exclude the sudden onset and rapid course of an attack of bubonic plague. Cynifrid, who witnessed the illness, does not say a word of other deaths. The hymn writer who points out how his subject differs from those of Virgil and of Homer

Bella Maro resonet, nos pacis dona canamus ;  
 Munera nos Christi, bella Maro resonet.  
 Carmina casta mihi, fedæ non raptus Helenæ ;  
 Luxus erit lubricis, carmina casta mihi.

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does not utter a word of prevalent plague or of the deaths at Ely of contemporary nuns.

“There are some,” says Bede earlier in this chapter of his fourth book, “who say that by the spirit of prophecy she both foretold the pestilence of which she was to die and openly made known to all present the number of those who from her monastery should be carried from the world by it.”

The Saxon Chronicle states that Etheldreda died in 679 but mentions no epidemic of plague at Ely in that year. Thus there is no real evidence that Etheldreda died, as has been conjectured, of the plague, while the actual account of her illness and the evidence of an eyewitness Cynifrid as to it establishes the strong probability that she died of tuberculosis. Cynifrid, the first mentioned of English physicians, whose opinion on a patient is thus set forth in Bede, was not a monk for he stood

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outside hearing the brethren and sisters singing within and the distinct voice of the newly elected abbess Sexberg suddenly calling out

Sit gloria nomini Domini

and was after that asked to come into the choir to see the disentombed body of abbess Etheldreda. Nor is there any mention of his being in holy orders.

We must not apply the ideas of our own day in which every man is educated and examined into his profession to the days of the Heptarchy. Cynifrid had probably read medicine and he practised it with sufficient success to give his patients confidence in him, for he had been attached to the abbey of Ely for more than sixteen years.

The latest new book on medicine of his time was that contained in the *Liber Etymologiarum* of Isidore of Seville.

If Cynifrid had read this treatise he knew the

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name of Hippocrates, son of Asclepius, born in the island of Cos, who is the only physician mentioned in the book on medicine, and except Varro the only author. He would have divided diseases into acute, chronic and superficial and could have given some definition of sixteen acute, and thirty-eight chronic diseases and of twenty-one diseases which are seen on the surface of the skin. Guided by Isidore, Cynifrid would have placed Etheldreda's disease under the heading Parotida and it is easy to imagine him after feeling the surface of the tumour expressing himself in Saxon to the abbess in the words of Isidore

Parotide sunt duritie vel collectiones que ex febris aut ex aliquo alio nascuntur in aurium vicinitate : unde et parotide sunt appellate.

As regards treatment Cynifrid would have explained that there were three kinds of cure : by diet and regimen, by drugs and by cutting

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with an iron instrument, and would have recommended the last. He felt the fluid inside the tumour and the appearances described later show that he made his incision in a part likely to drain the whole. He had never dissected the human body and such knowledge of Anatomy as he had may have been derived from the eleventh book of Isidore, a lengthy and confused account of the external appearances and internal organs of the body, without a single paragraph of precise description. He knew from this the lines of Ovid on man's erect posture

Pronaque cum spectent animalia cetera terram,  
Os homini sublime dedit: cælumque tueri  
Jussit, et erectos ad sidera tollere vultus.

I can recall their quotation, in the course of his teaching, by a lecturer on Anatomy whose remarks in every other particular differed from those of Isidore, so capable of everlasting use are the phrases of poets.

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If Cynifrid had looked into the rest of the *Liber Etymologiarum* his mind contained a large collection of information from many branches of knowledge. He had met with the names and some of the words of Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Lucretius, Lucilius, Ennius, Plautus, Terence, Catullus, Sallust, Lucan, Persius, Pliny, Varro and some other authors. He was acquainted with the letters of the Greek alphabet and the names of some Greek authors. He had a considerable knowledge of the sacred Scriptures. Some kinds of animals, of plants, of metals and of gems were known to him.

Much of his information we know to be inexact, but he was on the other hand acquainted with facts not universally known to members of universities at the present day, such as the names of the liberal arts whence masters and bachelors are designated. He had heard of MSS. written on purple vellum in gold or silver letters.



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Such may have been the attainments of Cynifrid, the first physician who appears in English history and whose opinion is recorded in the first great historical work which was written in England.

Cynifrid's attainments, supposing them not to exceed what is in Isidore, seem small to us, yet the present regius professor of physic in this university is certainly the first of his office who has known the true way in which a tuberculous abscess such as that of Etheldreda is produced.

Sir Thomas Watson, a great physician, a fellow of St John's and Linacre lecturer, in the last edition of his book on medicine which received his revision and which appeared some twelve hundred years after the time of Cynifrid, calls such chronic enlargement of the glands of the neck scrofulous and inclines to the opinion that there is a scrofulous diathesis and distinct

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tubercular diathesis. The uniformity as to cause of all the manifestations of tubercle and the fact that the swellings and bone diseases once called scrofulous are also due to the invasion of tissues by the tubercle bacillus have only been established within living memory.

I venture to mention this because in criticizing the ignorance of the Dark Ages or the Middle Ages modern writers often forget how very ignorant we ourselves are, or how recent is our knowledge.

At the death-bed of the Conqueror we have the prognosis of the physicians but not their diagnosis.

“*Consulti medici urinæ inspectione mortem citissimam prædixerunt,*” says William of Malmesbury who might have talked with men who knew Gilbert of Lisieux and the abbot of Jumièges, the king’s physicians, *archiatri* as the chronicler calls them, reminding one of the kings