
An Injunction Against Bloodletting

Introduction

Whereas other domains of medieval life are often unfairly maligned in popular culture today, the state of medicine was in fact dismal. Key medical malpractices such as bloodletting were not, however, developed in the Middle Ages, but instead practised on the authority of such ancient Greek authorities as Galen (2nd century CE). As such, medieval medicine confirms what we know from other domains of medieval learning, namely that it relied not on experiment but on authority. If anything, we may draw lessons for today and consider what it means that some of today's legal frameworks predate the cessation of bloodletting.

The three days here specified were, for unknown reasons, referred to as the Egyptian Days; other traditions identified twelve or 24 such days under the same nomen. The Egyptian Days may be distinguished from the Dog Days, on which bloodletting was likewise considered dangerous, by their even spread across the year, whereas the Dog Days were the period when Sirius, the Dog Star, was visible on the horizon. The coincidence of this event with July and August has given rise to today's association of the Dog Days with the crippling heat of summer in the Northern Hemisphere. For more on the Egyptian Days as well as the Dog Days, see László Sándor Chardonnens, *Anglo-Saxon*

Manuscript

Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 391, p. 718 (1060s).

Text

(1) Ðry dagas synd on xii monðum þa synd swiðe unhalwende monnum oððe nytenum blod on to forlætene oððe drenc to drincane: (2) þæt is se æftemæste monandæg on aprilis, ær he gange of tune; (3) and se forma monandæg on agustus monað; (4) and se æftemæste monandæg on december monað, ær he gange of tune.

(5) Se ðe on ðam .iii. monandagum men [oððe] nytene blod forlæteð, on þone ðridan dæg he sceal sweltan, oððe he ne gebiðeð þæs seofðan dæges; (6) and gif he drinc drinceð to læte crefte ær .xv. dagan he sceal sweltan; (7) and gif hwylc man acenned bið on þissum iii dagum he sceal sweltan yfele deaðe; (8) and se ðe et gose flæsc on þisson .iii. dagan ær .xl. dæge he sceal sweltan.

Notes

2, 4 gange of tune: The MnE expressions *come to town* and *go to town* date back to OE expressions meaning “arrive”; *of tune gan* accordingly has the opposite meaning, here used calendrically in the sense “be over.”