Herbal History Research Network, online seminar:
Early Medieval Remedies for Treating Cough and Lung Disease May 12, 2021

Wyrc briw wið lungenadle - make a stew for lung disease, Val Thomas MNIMH

Many "briw" recipes can be found in the text now known as the *Lacnunga*, in the manuscript MS Harley 585, and in the *Leechbooks of Bald* and *Leechbook 3* from MS BL Royal 12 D. The word "briw" occurs throughout the Anglo-Saxon medical corpus and has been variously translated as thick soup, stew, porridge and pottage. A lot of these "briw" recipes are for lung disease but they cover other conditions as well, presumably because this is such an easy and versatile way to administer herbs.

The "briw" was an everyday food during the period (Banham, 2004; Hagen, 2006), consisting mainly of cereals and pulses which are available all year round, with other ingredients depending on need and availability. In winter, when there is a greater need for fats and carbohydrates in the diet, more cereal can be added with some bacon or lard. Some brassicas and members of the onion family are also available in winter and were popular ingredients. In summer, a wealth of vegetables and herbs can be used in the "briw".

Bread was a favoured food in Anglo-Saxon England but too expensive and too labour-intensive for regular use by the poor, whereas if you make a "briw" over a fire you have a light anyway, there is no need to mill the grain, and the boiling pot requires little attention. The cauldron, or "hwer" in Old English could be iron, copper, brass or earthenware. Copper pots had more prestige, but an iron "hwer" has the advantage of increasing the iron content of the food and some remedies specify the use of an iron pot.

Barley (*Hordeum vulgare*), elecampane (*Inula helenium*), white horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) and radish (*Raphanus raphanistrum*) are four commonly-used lung "briw" ingredients. Barley, "an almost perfect food", containing fibre, calcium, iron and magnesium (Bartram, 1995), is often the basis for the "briw". It is also a sweet and warming, nutritive demulcent, which is still popular for stews. Elecampane has a long history in treating respiratory tract diseases, including bronchitis, emphysema, asthma and tuberculosis, and is an important warming expectorant and antispasmodic. Bartram (1995) suggests that the root is not very stable chemically, and that the best results are often obtained from decocting the fresh root, so the "briw" may well be the optimum way to administer this herb. White horehound has been used over the centuries to treat non-productive coughs, acute or chronic bronchitis, colds and asthma and has an expectorant action, probably due to its volatile oils, and it is also spasmolytic. Radish also contains anti-biotic substances and can be used to treat coughs (Barker, 2001). Other herbs found in lung "briw" recipes include hyssop which is still a popular herb for coughs, wood betony, pepper, dill, wild celery, onions and wormwood.

The remedies set out in the *Lacnunga* and the *Leechbooks* provide a good basic "briw" and plenty of inspiration on how to produce delicious and effective pottages to support the lungs.

References

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