Medieval Welsh Medical Recipes: Interpreting the Plant-names of the Past

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Abstract

For many years, medieval Welsh medical recipes were only available through three editions and translations which did not adequately represent the nature of these texts, or their contents, for modern audiences. In 2015, aided by a Wellcome Trust Research Fellowship, I set out to edit and translate these texts anew. While the editing of these texts presented some problems, it was the interpretation of the plant names that caused the greatest difficulty. I was aided in that work by a collection of previously unedited Latin-Welsh herbal glossaries, as well as the work of scholars working on the same types of materials in Old and Middle English, Anglo-Norman, Irish and Latin. In this presentation I will set out the problem of the interpretation of plant names in medieval Welsh medical texts, discuss the source of that problem, and show how I dealt with it to produce a new edition and translation of these texts for a modern audience.

Previous Editions and Translations of Middle Welsh Medical Texts

Diverres, P. (ed. and trans.), *Le Plus Ancien Texte des Meddygon Myddveu* (Paris: Maurice le Dault, 1913). (Jesus 111)

Jones, I. (ed. and trans.), 'Hafod 16 (A Medieval Welsh Medical Treatise)', *Études Celtiques* 7 and 8 (1955–9), 46–75, 270–339 and 66–97, 346–93. (Jesus 111)

Williams, J. (ed.) and Pughe, J. (trans.), *The Physicians of Myddvai*. (Llandovery: D. J. Roderic for the Welsh MSS. Society, 1861). (Cardiff 3.242)

Selected Recipes

Recipes using Creulys (Dwarf Elder)

- BLAdd: Ebula = y walwrt; Ebulus maior = y grewlys vawr; Ebulum idem est;
- Card: Ebula = y walword; Epulus maior = y greulys vawr; Epulum idem est;
- Pen204 AC p. 28: Ebelus yw y wallwrt; p. 51: Ebula = y walwrd = y wadlys vor; p. 51: Ebelus minor = y greylys vawr;
- Pen326 f. 20r: emulvs = y wadlys = gwalwrd = llysse gwaed vn ynt;
- Llst10 p. 33: Ebulus maior = y greulys vawr;
- BLAdd15045 f. 78v: Branca ura[...]ica a'r grvlys a'r walwrt a'r ebulus a llysie'r gwaet; f. 79v: Ebulus maior = y grevlvs vawr vendicaid a'r grwmswil;
- BLAdd14913 f. 41v: Eblus maior = y grewlys vawr; f. 44v: walwort = isgaw mair vn o'r pedwar kolon enaint yw; f. 51: Eblus maior = y grewlys vawr;
- Llst82 p. 6: y greflys fawr = y walfwrd; p. 164: y greylys = walwrd; p. 167: Ebyli maior = y greylys.

Diawt rac dolur penn: kymer y danhogen a'r veruen a'r wermot a'r selidon a'r henllydan a'r greulys vawr a mortera yn da. Chymer beth o greint y paris a briw a chymysc, a bwrw mywn

gwin ac ychydic o vel a hidyl drwy liein a dot y gadw. Ac yf o hwnnw gwppaneit bychan y bore a'r nos yn diwethaf.

A drink for a headache: take betony and vervain and wormwood and greater celandine and greater plantain and dwarf elder and pound them well in a mortar. Take some grains of paradise and pound them and mix, and put it into wine and a little honey and strain it through a linen cloth and put it aside to keep. And drink a small cupful of that in the morning and last thing at night.

Rac dolur penn: kymer y danhogen a'r wermot, verueyn, celidon, walwort, saygh, a phump gronyn o bybyr, a briw wynt ygyt, a berw mwyn dwfyr, ac yf ef yn unprytyawl.

For headache: take betony and wormwood, vervain, greater celandine, dwarf elder, sage, and five peppercorns, and pound them together, and boil in water, and drink it fasting.

Tak betayne and verueyne, wormwood and selidoyne, rue, wallworth and sawge, and ix cornys of pepyr; and stampe hem and sethe hem to-gedyr in water; and drink þer-of fastyng (BL Harley 2378 in Henslow (ed.) p. 106)

Y estwng chwydd o draet ac o esgeireu, kymer wreyd y grelys a risk a berw drwy dwfyr. A gwedy y berwer, bwrw ymeith yr vchaf a chymer y perued a chymysg hen vlonec ac ef, a gossot ar vrethyn neu ryw gadach ef, a dot wrth y draet neu y esgeireu y bo chwyd yndunt, ac ef a a y kaledi ymeith.

To reduce swelling from the feet and the ankles, take the root of the dwarf elder and bark and boil it in water. And after it has boiled, throw away the top part and take the middle and mix old fat with it, and place it on a cloth or some sort of bandage, and place it against the feet or the ankles that are swollen, and the hardness will go away.

Rac hwydd a dolur traet ac esgeirieu, berw wreid y grewlys vendigeit, a bwrw yr uchaf ymeith, a dot yn blaster wrtho.

For swelling and pain of the feet and the ankles, boil the root of the dwarf elder, and throw away the top part, and put it as a plaster onto it.

For akyng or swellyng on thies or on fet . Tak þe Rote of wallwort and seth it in water and do it awey þe ouermest ende tak þe medelest and stampe it and do þerto bores gres and mak a playster and ley þerto as hot as þow mayst suffre it (Wellcome 542 f. 2v, *Malaga Corpus)*

Rac dolur o uronneu, mortera wreidd y greulys a hen vlonec a dot wrthaw.

For pain in the breasts, pound dwarf elder root and old fat in a mortar and put it on it.

Item accipe radicem ebuli et tere cum uncto procine et superpone (Bodl. Rawlinson C 814 in Hunt 2001 (ed.) p. 20)

Recipes using Canwraidd (Mugwort)

- BLAdd: Arthemesia = mater herbarum = y ganwreidd loyt;
- Pen326 f. 20r: llysse Ievan = llysse llwyd = y ganwraidd lwyd = y veidioc lwyd = mam y llysseoedd = mwgwrd = Margwrt = Arthamesia;
- Llst10 p. 28: Artemesia = y ganwraidd;
- BLAdd14913 f. 39r: Artyemessy yw y mwgwrt y gannwraidd; f. 40v: Artemysia = Mogwrt sive llysie lloydon; f. 43r: Cumraec: llyseu Iefan; Saesnec: mugworde; f. 43r: Mater herbarum = mam y llysie = Artemisia; f. 43r: Mugworte = llyseu llwydion; f. 51v:Artemysia sef yw ganwraeidd;
- Llst82 p. 5: y feddog lwyd = y ganwraidd; p. 7: makwrt = llysse Ievan a'r ganwraidd (mae day ryw o'r ganwraidd, y lwyd a'r goch: y goch yr wriw a'r lwyd yw'r feniw); p. 164: y feddog lwyd = y ganwraidd; p. 166: mwgwrt = llysse Ieuan a'r ganwraidd a'r feidiog; p. 168: y feddog lwyd = y ganwraidd; p. 170: artemisia = y ganwraidd.

O'r mynny na bych ludedic yr a ymdeych, yf y bore loneit plisgyn wy o sud y ganwreid gyt ac garllec, ac ny briwy ac ny blinhey yr meint a gerdych y dyd hwnnw.

If you want to avoid exhaustion despite travelling, drink an eggshell full of mugwort juice with garlic in the morning, and you will not be injured nor will you tire no matter how far you walk on that day.

Gif man on wei3e gon wille, ðanne 3enime he him on hande þas write artemesiam & habbe mid him; þanne ne beþ he weri on 3eie (deVriend (ed.), p. 55).

O byd gwreic heb allu esgor y llwyth, rwymer deil y ganwreidd wrth y mordwyt assw a thynner yn ebrwydd ymeith ywedy ydd esgoro rac tywallt y hemysgar.

If a woman is unable to deliver her child, let mugwort leaves be bound to her left thigh, and let them be removed immediately after she has given birth in case her organs should drop.

Also take þe same herbe grene as she growyht & stampe yt & bynde yt to þe wombe. And she shal delyuery þe werplynge þat ys þeryn (GUL Hunter 497 f. 3r–v, *Malaga Corpus*).

Y wylltu kylyon neu ednot, dot y ganwreid yn y lle y gnotaont dyuot, ac wynt a ffoant ac a vydant veirw.

To drive away flies or insects, put mugwort in the place where they tend to come, and they will flee and they will die.

Recipes using Morgelyn (Henbane)

Hennebane ys cleped Iusqiamus & yn latyn caniculata þys herbe ys seyde to be ryght cold…

- The iij uertu þe Iuys helde yn ne atte ere wol sle þe wormes þat ben yn hem & abate many oþer doloures & dysseses of þe eres.
- The iiij uertu It ys sayde þat þe uenygre yn wyche þe rotes of þys herbe hath be soden ynne wol abate þe tothe ache though yt be gret. yf þys uenygre be luke. & hold longe yn þe mothe. (Herbal of Macer Floridus, GUL Hunter 497 f. 78r, *Malaga Corpus*)

Iusguiamus yw henban. Rinweddav hwnn: yr oel a wneler ohonaw i hvn, ef a ddistrywia bob maner o'r gowt. Heuyt ef a dyrr y pesswch a ffostwn gwressoc ac ef a ddilea y potag. Da yw rac y ddannoydd. Da yw i sudd rac pob maner brathav. Had y llyssewynn hwnn a gynnellir ymis Awst. *(Agnus Castus*, NLW Peniarth 204)

Iusquiamus is Henbane. The virtues of that herb: the oil that is made from it will destroy every type of gout. Also it will break a cough and a hot aposteme and it will destroy a podagre. It is good against toothache. Its juice is good against every type of wound. The seed of this herb is collected in August.

Rac y dannoed, kymer kanhwyll o wer dauat a grawn y morgelyn a'y losci yn nassat y galler y'r deint a dwfyr oer dan y ganhwyll, a'r pryffet a ddygwyd yn y dwfyr rac gwres y ganhwyll.

For toothache, take a candle made of sheep tallow and henbane seeds and burn it as close as possible to the teeth, with cold water under the candle, and the worms will fall into the water because of the heat of the candle.

Take þe sede of hennebane and þe sede of lyke and senuy sede & Encence þen take A lytyl potte and stoppe hym fast þat þer come none Eyre oute bote At A lytyl hole of A pype þen holde þy sore ouyr þe ende of þat pype þat þe smoke goe Euyn ynto þe toþe halde þy mowþe ouyr A dyssche with watyr þer þu schalte see þe wormys hyt doþe Away Ache (Wellcome 409, f. 40r, *Malaga Corpus*).

For in þe beginning of wormes in þe teeþ, þe ache is ful kene, and þan it may ben y-helid with þe smoke of henbane (Gilbertus Anglicus, ed. Getz, p. 94).

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 (*Bald's Leechbook*, trans. Cockayne, p. 51)

Manuscripts containing Medieval Welsh Medical Texts

Oxford Jesus College MS 111, the Red Book of Hergest, c. 1382

https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/9bf187bf-f862-4453-bc4f-851f6d3948af/

Oxford Bodleian Rawlinson MS B467

https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/1cd2f0b5-cdb1-43ff-8eda-e5319aebd862/surfaces/3daa9236-fc9c-400e-a66e-1996243ae068/

On-line Resources

Medieval Welsh Medical Texts Volume 1: The Recipes

http://uwp.co.uk/book/medieval-welsh-medical-texts/

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK558253

Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru / The University of Wales Dictionary

https://www.geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html

Llên Natur – Bywiadur

This is a dictionary of Welsh plant and animal names created and maintained by the Edward Lhuyd Society/Cymdeithas Edward Llwyd

https://www.llennatur.cymru/Y-Bywiadur

Dictionary of Old English Plant Names

An excellent resource for Old English plant names, fully referenced.

http://oldenglish-plantnames.org/

The Malaga Corpus of Late Middle English, Early Modern and Later Modern Scientific Prose

Unfortunately the website for this invaluable corpus no longer functions, but it may be possible for the tech savvy to find a workaround, or otherwise to contact the host institutions.

https://varieng.helsinki.fi/CoRD/corpora/SciProse/