

Viking Medicine and Magic

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Introduction

The people of medieval Scandinavia, known commonly as the Vikings, were similar to many other Europeans of their time. Farming, agriculture, craftsmanship, and trade were primary aspects of their lives, along with exploration. Where the Vikings tended to differentiate themselves from the rest of Europe, as well as gain much of their notoriety, was through their extensive raids, killings, and lootings all across the medieval world. These frequent and often violent interactions required adequate medical attention that could address everything from minor injuries to life-threatening battle wounds. The techniques used, like many aspects of Viking culture, were a blend of practices pulling from a variety of areas within Scandinavian daily life, religion, spirituality, and practicality. Most notable was the primary aspect of magic that seemingly blended into many areas of medicine. While herbal remedies and superstitions associated with medical practices were not uncommon in other parts of Europe, the Norse entanglement between these methods was beyond that of many other cultures. This ultimately led to the question of what medical and magical practices were used in Viking society and to what degree magic played alongside medicine, as well as the effectiveness of these treatments.

Background

Scandinavians, hailing from modern-day Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, had a structured and self-sufficient society. It was organized into three classes: the jarls or aristocracy, karls or the lower class, and thralls or slaves.¹ Settlements consisted mainly

of small villages centered around agriculture and rearing animals. Due to fertile land being scarce in Scandinavia, these villages were isolated and held small populations.² The Vikings, along with being farmers, were “blacksmiths, armorers, brewers, merchants, weavers, luthiers (those who made stringed instruments), drum-makers, poets, musicians, craftsmen, carpenters, jewelers, and many other occupations.”³ Given their isolation, Norse men and women had to have a diverse set of skills that allowed them to be self-sustaining. For women, they had relative autonomy over their lives, including authority over the house and family; however, they lacked a role in public life and free will in marriage.⁴ Nevertheless, they boasted more independence than in other societies during this period. Vikings of all classes gave care to their physical appearances and health, “Evidence from both literary sources and archaeological sources shows that cleanliness, good hygiene, and regular grooming were a part of Norse life.”⁵ This allowed for the Viking population at large to be generally healthy and have a longer life expectancy.⁶ The importance they placed on their health and wellbeing stayed with them and became an important element of their success as they expanded into the rest of the medieval world.

Around the eighth century, the Viking Age began which marked a wave of Norse exploration, interaction, and raids on the European mainland

2 John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (Swanston Publishing Limited, 1995): 36.

3 Mark, “Vikings.”

4 Haywood, *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, 44–45.

5 “Health, Grooming, and Medicine in the Viking Age,” Hurstwic, accessed October 2, 2021, http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/daily_living/text/health_and_medicine.htm.

6 Neil Westphalen, “Viking Warfare, Ships and Medicine,” *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health*, accessed October 2, 2021, <https://jmvh.org/article/viking-warfare-ships-and-medicine/>.

1 Joshua J. Mark, “Vikings,” *World History Encyclopedia*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.worldhistory.org/Vikings/>.

and the British Isles. Causes for this age have created significant debate among historians for centuries, with some of the major reasons being population expansion, limited resources, advancement in seafaring technology, trade, religious retribution against the Christians, and an opportunity for wealth and power.⁷ A combination of these reasons was probable for Viking expansion, and with this came development within their societies at home and abroad. The first Viking towns began being built around this time in Scandinavia, along with permanent settlements in Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland.⁸ Additional Viking interactions, settlements, and trade have been recorded all across the western European coast, North America, into Russia, the Mediterranean, and the coast of North Africa.⁹ Following the Viking Age came the spread of Christianity and with it the spread of European ideas and knowledge. It became evident through the utilization of new medical techniques that “the new medicine of the south was making inroads throughout Scandinavia.”¹⁰ This spread of medical knowledge, however, did not have the same degree of influence as it possessed in Europe. Norse medicine remained heavily centered around the traditional techniques and methods developed and passed down from generations of healers.

Norse Medicine

General Health Care and Treatments

The Vikings, unsurprisingly, dealt with extremely similar daily health problems, illnesses, and diseases that humans still deal with today. Their methods, while seeming counterproductive and crude in some instances, nevertheless provided relatively effective solutions. To treat infections, Scandinavians would combine leek, garlic, and wine into a brass or copper container and pour it onto the infected area. While having cytotoxic properties that made this treatment very painful, it proved to be effective nonetheless.¹¹ Honey, the Norse discovered, could be used as an antiseptic, “its high sugar content draws

out water from bacteria cells, dehydrating and killing them.”¹² Due to the Norse diet being heavy with fish, many instances occurred where fish bones were accidentally swallowed. To remedy this or any other sharp object that entered a person’s digestive system, a “thick oatmeal porridge would be given to the patient in order to dislodge or encapsulate the sharp object.”¹³ Diabetes was another problem the Vikings faced and would be diagnosed by the smelling or tasting of a person’s urine. If it was sweet, they would remove honey and sugar from their diets to remedy this chronic health condition.¹⁴ In most cases, Norse healers could diagnose a majority of the ailments they encountered and prescribe the correct treatment to combat them properly.

Herbal and other natural remedies were a major part of Norse medicine. The use of herbs for treatments came in a variety of forms:

They might be taken or applied internally (systemically or topically), externally (topically), used as a protective ward (kept in a pouch worn around the neck, laid at windows and the doorsill of a sickroom), placed in bedding, or planted near the entrance of the house and/or byre. They were compounded with other ingredients to make potions, pills, tinctures, gruels, teas, syrups, poultices, gargles, salves, etc.¹⁵

Some common uses for herbs included the utilization of marrubium vulgare or white horehound to treat a cough.¹⁶ This herb is still used today and can be found in modern lozenges. Additionally, flaxseed was combined with small amounts of warm water to create a thick, slimy pudding that could stimulate digestive action when ingested.¹⁷ Aromatic herbs were used to treat cramps and muscle pain. Eucalyptus oil or turpentine were used as disinfectants or to treat issues with the peripheral nervous system.¹⁸ Herbs, seeds, fungi, mosses, oils, and other plants were all regularly used in Norse medicine, both on their own and

7 Haywood, *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, 99–111.

8 Haywood, *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, 36, 8.

9 Ibid., 8.

10 David Robertson, “Magical Medicine in Viking Scandinavia,” *Medical History* 20, no. 3 (1976): 317. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1081785/pdf/medhist00110-0088.pdf>.

11 “Surgery & Medicine,” Vikings of Middle England, accessed October 2, 2021, <https://www.vikingsof.me/surgery-medicine.html#top>.

12 Ibid.

13 J.T. Sibley, *The Way of the Wise: Traditional Norwegian Folk and Magic Medicine* (Xlibris US, 2015).

14 Sibley, *The Way of the Wise*.

15 Ibid.

16 Vikings of Middle England, “Surgery & Medicine.”

17 Sibley, *The Way of the Wise*.

18 Ibid.

alongside surgical procedures and magical practices.

Battlefield First Aid

One of the most common records of Norse medicine is that of battlefield first aid. This is unsurprising for a variety of reasons, the first of which being that Viking interactions abroad were often violent and deadly affairs that required heavy medical attention. Secondly, the sagas of the Icelanders are the predominant source historians have that reveal what life was like in medieval Scandinavia. The majority of medical information found in these sagas is the treatment of wounds following the violent Vikings' interactions abroad. The sagas themselves do, however, cause some difficulty in terms of reliability as they were recorded in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries while detailing information from the ninth through the eleventh century. Nonetheless, "the general consensus today is that sagas about Icelanders provides genuine insight into the social structure and social processes of Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries."¹⁹ Therefore, while the events described in the sagas may have been fictional accounts, the medical practices recorded would be accurate to the time and provide a reliable account to how certain injuries would have been cared for.

During Viking battles, a variety of tactics were employed to protect and temporarily aid those who had been wounded. Warriors would throw their shields onto fallen men to cover and protect them from further injury.²⁰ An account from *Gisli Sursson's Saga* recounts that during Gisil's final battle he was attacked by a barrage of spears causing his guts to spill out, which he "gathered them up together in his shirt and bound them underneath with the cord."²¹ This method was recorded as being performed without hesitation, indicating either that this technique was commonly performed during battle or that Gisil was a quick thinker and determined to keep fighting despite the risk. While only meant to be a temporary fix, the saga continues to describe Gisil killing a(n) Eyjolf's kinsman, Thord, only to then collapse and die on top

of him.²² Therefore, whilst being effective as a short-term solution, it did not prove effective for survival after the battle. In *The Saga of the Heath Slaying*, it is recorded that during long battles a pause could be called, as well as the use of lulls in the fighting, to allow the men to bind up their wounds.²³ Majority of the battlefield first aid tactics used by the Vikings were temporary solutions that prioritized the continuing of combat and persevering over the long-term health and survival of their warriors.

Surgical Procedures

Following battles and other violent interactions, the sagas often recorded how wounds were diagnosed and cared for. One of the methods used to diagnose intestinal wounds was by ingesting soup that had a strong odor:

She examined the wound that he had in his side, felt that there was a piece of iron stuck in it, but could not tell for certain which way it had gone in. She had been cooking in a stone kettle there, ground garlic and other herbs and boiled it together and was giving it to wounded men and could find out like that whether they had intestinal wounds, for it smelt of garlic from out of the wound if it was intestinal.²⁴

Once this diagnosis was made, the wound could be properly treated. Another practice recorded in the sagas was the setting of broken bones. In *The Saga of the Ere-Dwellers*, following a battle, the men returned home to have their wounds healed, with Thorod Thorbrandson sustaining a neck injury that caused him to be unable to hold his head upright.²⁵ After being healed, his neck was "somewhat drawn backwards on his trunk" and was corrected by reopening the wound and resetting it to be straight with his spine.²⁶ This technique was again used in *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* where in

19 Margaret Cormack, "Fact and Fiction in the Icelandic Sagas" *History Compass* 5, no. 1 (2007): 207.

20 Hurstwic, "Health, Grooming, and Medicine in the Viking Age."

21 "Gisli Sursson's Saga," In *The Sagas of Icelanders*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson (Leifur Eiríksson Publishing Limited, 1997): 555.

22 "Gisli Sursson's Saga," *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 555.

23 "The Saga of the Heath Slayings," *Icelandic Saga Database*, translated by William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, accessed October 2, 2021, http://www.sagadb.org/eyrbyggja_saga.en.

24 Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, translated by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes, (Viking Society, 2014): 262.

25 "The Saga of the Ere-Dwellers," *Icelandic Saga Database*, translated by William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, accessed October 2, 2021, http://www.sagadb.org/eyrbyggja_saga.en.

26 "The Saga of the Ere-Dwellers," *Icelandic Saga Database*.

a wrestling match a man's ankle was twisted out of its joint and treated by bandaging and resetting the joint back into its correct place.²⁷ Both of these sagas provide evidence that the Norse regularly used corrective treatments to manipulate bones back into their correct position. This is additionally supported through skeletal remains that, "show evidence of fractures that have healed in ribs, and bones of the arms and legs."²⁸ These procedures are not far off from the techniques utilized today and have proven to be effective in mending bones back together.

Norse Magic

Background and Overview

Norse magic holds deep roots in Scandinavian society and culture. Magic was closely linked to the Old Norse religion through its connection to the deities of Óðinn and Freyja. Its developments were most prominent during the Iron Age, with Scandinavian magics' true origins being unknown.²⁹ The core of Old Norse magic was Seiðr, which was "a collective term for a whole complex of practices, each serving a different function within the larger system of sorcery."³⁰ Seiðr was associated with the mind and acted as an extension of its abilities. Some of the rituals and uses of seiðr included:

Divination and clairvoyance; for seeking out the hidden, both in the secrets of the mind and in physical locations; for healing the sick; for bringing good luck; for controlling the weather; for calling game animals and fish. Importantly, it could also be used for the opposite of these things – to curse an individual or an enterprise; to blight the land and make it barren; to induce illness; to tell disaster; to injure, maim and kill, in domestic disputes and especially in battle.³¹

Beyond seiðr, five other types of sorcery have been displayed and identified throughout Norse sources. The first of which is galdr, a category of magic that is centered around high-pitched singing most

often employed for cursing. While sometimes used in combination with seiðr, the two are separate practices, with seiðr setting the "pattern for the ritual as a whole" and galdr being "a particular element in a larger complex of operative magical practice."³² A second category of magic is gandr, which is related to Ginnungagap, the Norse and Germanic mythological belief of a void in which the universe was formed. Gandr was one of the primary forces used in this creation, and its power can be harnessed through this principle of Norse magic. Although, this type of magic was extremely powerful, with only the highly skilled Norse having the ability to possess it as, "this form of sorcerous power was of considerable dignity."³³ This aspect of dignity extended to be a mark for both the magic itself, given its origin, and the status of the person wielding it.

The third aspect of Norse magic is útisetá, a practice that is not a specific ritual but rather a technique that was used to insight other rituals. This form of magic is related to the "Óðinnic communications with the dead. In brief, it seems to have involved sitting outside at night, in special places such as burial mounds, by running water, or beneath the bodies of the hanged in order to receive spiritual power."³⁴ The fourth category of magic has been termed Óðinnic sorcery.³⁵ These rituals are in connection to Óðinn and his abilities. Some of the skills of this practice are completely off-limits for human sorcerers, but from the Eddic poems, it is made known that others are readily available.³⁶ Lastly is general sorcery, referenced to as "a general 'background noise' of popular magic, often unsophisticated or indeed completely unarticulated in a practical way, occurring throughout the literature."³⁷ These six types of Norse magic display the wide range of abilities and uses that Norse magic entailed, as well as the mythological traditions they stemmed from.

Uses of Magic for Medical Treatment

In the Icelandic sagas, there are various records of instances where magic was used to heal ailments

27 "The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue," In *The Sagas of Icelanders*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson (Leifur Eiríksson Publishing Limited, 199): 582.

28 Hurstwic, "Health, Grooming, and Medicine in the Viking Age."

29 Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, (Oxbow Books, 2013): 34.

30 Ibid.

31 Price, *The Viking Way*, 34.

32 Price, *The Viking Way*, 35.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Price, *The Viking Way*, 35.

37 Ibid.

instead of traditional medical or herbal remedies. One of these accounts is in *Egil's Saga*, where a woman named Helga was suffering from a “wasting sickness, and could not sleep at night because of some kind of delirium.”³⁸ Her sickness was recorded as being caused by love runes that were incorrectly inscribed onto a whalebone resulting in a sickness curse instead. Egil, to cure her ailment, scraped the inscription off into the fire along with burning the whalebone and carved new runes that he placed under her pillow. These runes effectively counteracted the original ones and cured her.³⁹ In *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, a sword named Skofnung was given magical abilities, one of which being that “Any wound it inflicts will not heal unless rubbed with the healing stone which accompanies it.”⁴⁰ This effectively meant that without the sword being rubbed onto the healing stone, no wounds would be able to heal regardless of other magic or medical treatments used on the person the sword struck. The saga does, however, fail to provide evidence of whether or not this held true.

Beyond the sagas, other records of Norse magic used for healing include a wide variety of additional practices. The use of transference, a method in which “disease could be transferred from a patient to some disposable or distant object,” was a common practice in Scandinavia.⁴¹ The custom of smörjning is a prime example of this, where a sick child would walk through an opening in a “healing tree” that would effectively transfer their disease onto the tree.⁴² Other openings utilized for transference or to trap a person’s sickness included holes in stones or in the earth, underneath or between the legs of a foal or in its afterbirth, and under hung criminals, especially thieves.⁴³ A method used to treat heartburn was through the carving of crosses. In this magical practice “the healer would cut several (usually three to four) crosses on the patient’s chest over the sternum, and blood from these shallow incisions was put on a lump of sugar, which the

patient would eat.”⁴⁴ To treat mosott, a Norse term for depression and poor appetite, woolen yarn would be measured and cut to match the length of the patient’s body. Following this:

The measurer then rolled the yarn up into a smallish skien, upon which the patient had to spit on it three times. The skein was then tied onto the left arm of the patient, who had to keep it there for three days and three nights, after which it was buried in the earth for the same length of time [...] It was important that the patient not smell or see the smoke. In other cases, folks simply let the yarn lie in the earth to rot, and when it has done so, the patient would theoretically be cured.⁴⁵

The aspect of borrowing was another method of healing magic. Bones or pebbles would be taken from churchyards and replaced by coins temporarily until they were returned to their previous location.⁴⁶ Borrowing, while mainly used for healing, did border close to the realm of black magic and other more sinister uses of seiðr.

Other magic practices to remedy sickness included the use of charms. These charms, also known as word magic or incantations, played an important and central role in magical healing. The charms themselves all involved similar elements, “it may contain an epic portion, an appeal to a superior spirit, the enunciation or writing of potent names or letters, the listing of ways to bind or dispose of the offending ailment, and the performer’s boast of power over the enemy.”⁴⁷ The Old Norse poems and sagas record charms being used for the treatment of aches and pains, by midwives to lessen the strains of labor, and as treatments for fractures and broken bones.⁴⁸ Magic on its own proved to be a versatile tool for medical treatment and employed many different techniques to properly combat the ailments it sought to heal.

Role of Women

Early Nordic magic was dominated by women

38 “Egil’s Saga,” In *The Sagas of Icelanders*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, (Leifur Eiriksson Publishing Limited, 1997): 141.

39 Ibid., 141, 147.

40 “The Saga of the People of Laxardal,” In *The Sagas of Icelanders*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson (Leifur Eiriksson Publishing Limited, 1997), 383–384.

41 Thomas DuBois. *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (United Kingdom: University of Pennsylvania Press, Incorporated, 1999): 105.

42 Ibid., 105–106.

43 Sibley, *The Way of the Wise*.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Sibley, *The Way of the Wise*.

47 DuBois. *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, 106–107.

48 Ibid., 111.

to the extent that it could be argued they had a monopoly over the skill. The gift of *forsjá* or foresight was solely possessed by mortal and mythical women, which allowed them to predict the future based upon premonitions or dreams without the help of magic.⁴⁹ Predicting the future through the use of magic was known as *forlog* and was most often used to determine the fate of an individual.⁵⁰ This activity was linked to the *vǫlur*, which was a group of all-female seeress. *Forlog* was also said to have originally been a “female specialty reserved for the goddesses.”⁵¹ The connection and shared practices of magic between women and goddesses further defined the belief that magic was a sacred female-dominated profession. Women who practiced magic were respected in their communities and recognized for being generally skilled at the art.⁵² Nevertheless, not all women were free from persecution. In some instances, women were killed for uralitizing their abilities, especially when it was used to cause harm.⁵³ Men who practiced magic did hold the same respect women were given, yet a stigma remained attached to it as many considered it to be a womanly profession. Following the rise of Christianity, an increase of men to the profession also occurred, possibly as a way to “domesticate pagan magic.”⁵⁴ This demographic shift may have also been influenced due to the surrounding misogyny of the time. Regardless, the role of women in Norse magic remained prominent as they were at the center of its practices and traditions.

Medicine and Magic Intertwined

Norse healers and Wise Women commonly utilized both medical and physical treatments alongside magical and supernatural ones. There are many factors that contributed to why these practices were so intertwined with each other, with the most prominent being Norse culture itself, “In a world of staggering epidemics, hand-to-hand combat, and hard manual labor, the healing traditions of the Norse

Viking Age provided a link between the needs of the human community and the powers that lay beyond.”⁵⁵ Norse healers became one of the key members of Viking society as they acted as this link between the two and tapped into the spirituality the Scandinavians cherished so much. Practicing Wise Women or Wise Ones were required to be “fluent not only in spellcraft, but also in the use of medicinal plant, seeds, fungi, animal products, etc. [...] The Wise One would have to be skilled in diagnosis, midwifery, the techniques of simple surgery and pharmacology, psychology, veterinary medicine, dentistry, nutrition.”⁵⁶ Information over magical and medical practices would be passed down throughout the generations of healers, both the treatments that proved effective and those that did not. Versatility was the key in Norse medicine, as specialization was not a common aspect of this profession, but rather their ability to treat any diseases, physical ailment, or other medical or mental condition a Viking may possess.

Brain diseases and mental health problems such as headaches, schizophrenia, epilepsy, depression, and bipolar syndrome were all treated with both herbal and magical remedies. Indigestion, heartburn, stomach ulcers, constipation, diarrhea, and hemorrhoids, along with a variety of other dimensional and intestinal issues, were also dealt with through a combination of herbal treatments and the uttering of a few healing spells.⁵⁷ These dual treatments also extended into women’s health, mainly cramping, heavy menstrual bleeding, premenstrual syndrome, and vaginal yeast infections. If a woman’s menstrual bleeding was especially heavy to the point of concern, bloodstopping douches would be utilized along with magical spells.⁵⁸ Additionally, sexual enhancements, prevention of conception, and encouragement of miscarriage all employed the mixed practices of magic and herbal treatments.⁵⁹ Finnish healers in specific employed a combination of “charms, sauna, massage, and ecstatic trance to treat various ailments.”⁶⁰ While not traditional medicine, these hygiene and therapeutic practices did contribute to the healing process and were used in

49 Jenny Jochens, “Old Norse Magic and Gender: Þátrr Þorvalds Ens Víðfǫrla,” *Scandinavian Studies* 63, no. 3 (1991): 306–307.

50 Ibid., 307.

51 Ibid.

52 Jochens, “Old Norse Magic and Gender,” 307.

53 “The Role of Women in Viking Society,” Hurstwic, accessed October 2, 2021, <http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/society/text/women.htm>.

54 Jochens, “Old Norse Magic and Gender,” 208.

55 DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, 120.

56 Sibley, *The Way of the Wise*.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, 104.

combination, especially with transference methods to dispose of the disease.

Childbirth was another primary aspect of Norse life that saw the entanglement between magical and medical practices. At the beginning of labor, chamomile tea, reindeer moss, or rose blossoms crushed in ale would be given to help with birthing pains.⁶¹ As labor continued and contractions became more frequent, spells and charms could be recited into ale, tea, water, or salt and given to the mother to consume. Following the birth, “medicines prepared from mugwort root were used to expel the placenta.”⁶² Other practices observed during childbirth included “The injunction against crossing or knotting in the presence of a women in labor – a piece of sympathetic magic seeking to create an environment of looseness and ease for the emerging infant.”⁶³ A blend of medicine and magic proved to be versatile in handling most ailments and biological processes Norse healers encountered, as these methods were seemingly used interchangeably or hand in hand with one another.

Yet, the effectiveness of magic alongside medicine may, in truth, be less practical for the physical healing of the body, but rather was meant to play a separate role. The aspect of dramatization was a notable part of Norse medical treatments, with magic being the biggest contributing factor to this. The healer’s appearance and home alone could set the tone, ease the patient’s mind, and convince them that they possessed the skills required to adequately help them, “the healer might have many bunches of herbs hanging from the rafters and walls of her cottage to dry, pots and jars of various ointments on the shelves, and mysterious tools tucked not-quite-out-of-sight here and there.”⁶⁴ The addition of spells following treatments via herbs, amputations, or surgeries were intended to both assist with the physical treatments performed and to add to the drama of the given circumstance. This could act as a way to legitimize the procedure given and as a way to appease the patient, given the Norse’s spirituality and love for the added flare. Norse healers would additionally utilize Latin and other non-Norse vocabulary to heighten the drama of a spell.⁶⁵ While

magic was still used on its own to provide medical treatments, when added alongside medicine it was used less to heighten the effectiveness of a given procedure, but more so to add the much-desired theatrics Scandinavians revered.

Conclusion

Vikings are memorialized for their brutality and skill in combat, elaborate seafaring technology, and unique religious beliefs. However, their intelligence in medical practices receives far less praise, given its versatility and general effectiveness. The Norse healers possessed an eye for ailment and utilized visual and physical cues to properly diagnose their patients. The treatments prescribed not only displayed their intelligence and understanding of human anatomy but also their knowledge of their environment and plant life. While herbal remedies were used frequently throughout the rest of medieval Europe, the methods in which the Vikings utilized them both in and on the body and throughout a person’s residence were a very distinctive practice. On the battlefield, the Vikings’ determination often trumped the prioritization of their own health and longevity. On the other hand, their surgical procedures were centered around the long-term health of the Scandinavians. These treatments were not only recorded as being effective but are very similar to surgical and corrective treatments used in modern medicine.

Norse magic was as rich and complex as the culture that practiced it. It was seemingly just as versatile and all-encompassing as Scandinavian medicine. Women possessed a major role in magic, a factor that added to their greater freedoms and independence compared to the rest of the medieval world. This female-majority profession was regarded highly in Viking society, and they were called upon to treat many of the illnesses they also had medical solutions for. Viking healers had to be multidisciplinary in their skills, as they were required to be well-versed in all aspects of medical, herbal, and surgical knowledge, as well as spells and charms. In addition, the dramatization of medical treatments was another important element in which magic, more often than not, took on this role in combination with the actual physical treatment.

61 Sibley, *The Way of the Wise*.

62 Ibid.

63 DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, 113.

64 Sibley, *The Way of the Wise*.

65 Sibley, *The Way of the Wise*.

While the question over whether the magic on its own was effective in combatting illness is disputable, the medical knowledge that the Vikings employed is undeniably advanced and an undervalued part of their legacy.

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