

*Anglo-Saxon
birth charm
(with serpents!)
in the Lacnunga,
a compendium of
medical remedies,
circa 1000 CE.*

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praecantatores to which people flocked for healing, protection, and other blessings. These witches did more than chant; they gave counsel, and with it healing and protective remedies, in the form of herbs, amulets, knotted ties, and other medicine objects.⁵⁵

The woman enchants, the serpent enchants

Back in the 5th century, Caesarius of Arles singled out female *incantatrices*, warning Christians (men in particular) not to seek them out for healing or prophecy. He said it was better for a man “if he does not send for a soothsayer, if he does not make bindings, he does not admit any enchantresses. The woman enchants, the serpent enchants.”⁵⁶ That misogynist trope is foundational priestcraft, in the stamp of the church patriarchs. But it is commentary on a real female sphere of power. As Bernadette Filotas summarizes from English and Frankish sources, “enchantment was typically the practice of women.” And they performed it for female purposes, which included weaving, conception and contraception, birth, and protection from men. For example, the Pseudo-Egbert penitential condemns Anglo-Saxon women for using incantations to conceive.⁵⁷

The *carminatrix* was named from *carmen*, another Latin word for “song.” From it descends French *charme*, and in turn the English *charm* and *charmer*. These medieval names referred to women who chanted healing verse and performed ritual cures. In Spanish such

women were called *ensalmadoras*, a name that implies they used Christian prayers in their chants. Germans called them *segencærinne*, “signers,” for the gestures they made over people.⁵⁸ In modern Irish, *cailleach phiseogach* is a common name for an old sorceress who works spells or charms.⁵⁹

The word “spell” itself originally meant “speak, tell” (Old English *spellian*, Anglo-French *espeller*, Old French *espelir*: “mean, signify, explain, interpret”).⁶⁰ The meanings of these words stretched over time, so that a German source used *carmen* to mean amulet, from something that was sung over.⁶¹ This kind of semantic drift is common. English “charming” referred to love spells, but now means “attractive.”

In Ireland, incantation figured prominently in the druidic arts. It was a means of attaining *imbas forosnai*, the “wisdom that illumines,” and also of revealing it. The *Táin* shows Fedelm chanting a long prophecy to Medb of Connacht. Nora Chadwick saw this state of inspiration as having originally been “the special métier of women.” One of the old sources she mentions is the lost *Druim Snechta*, of which only fragments survive. One says that the British witch Scáthach practiced *imbis forosnai*. Other sources describe Imbas as “a process of revelation brought on by a mantic sleep.”⁶²

Imbas was classed with two other arts, both involving incantation. In the first, *teinm laida*, “illumination of song,” inspiration comes through chanting, a signature of shamanic ecstasy. One source says that *teinm laida* belongs to the fourteen streams of poetry. *Teinm* is thought to derive from *tep-*, “heat,” the same root as Sanskrit *tapas*, which describes intensive spiritual practices.

According to the Prologue to the *Senchas Mór*, different kinds of offerings were made for *imbis forosnai* and *teinm laida*. These “heathen rites” were the reason that Patrick abolished them, “for neither *teinm laida* nor *imbis forosnai* could be performed without the accompaniment of heathen offerings.”⁶³ The laws



*The Moylough Belt Shrine
8th century Ireland (detail)*

of Patrick and his successors abolished these two forms of *filidecht* (seership)—and they admonish Irish kings not to consult with druids or “pythoneses.”⁶⁴

Around 900, the *Sanas Cormaic* concurred that these arts were considered too pagan to be permitted. Only *dichetal do chennaib* was allowed to continue under Christianity. The phrase is variously translated as “to chant in prophetic strains,” as “poetry from the head,” or “chanting from the bones.”⁶⁵ It was also described as “a declaration from the ends of his bones at once.” Early sources hint that *dichetal do chennaib* involved moving the fingertips in gestures.⁶⁶ One writer associates it with “chanting by means of the hazels of prophecy,” apparently referring to divinatory wands.⁶⁷ This fragment recalls the hazelnuts of Wisdom that fall into the Well of Segais, at the source of the Boyne, where they turn the bellies of the salmon purple. This fountain was sought out in hopes of attaining illumination.

leod runan

Anglo-Saxons called the chanting witch *leóð-rūne* or *leóth-rūne*, “song mysteries.” *Leóð* means song, poetry, verse;⁶⁸ compare with Old High German

leod (modern *Lied*), Irish *lóid*, Scots *laoidh*, “song, poem,” French *lai* and English *lay*, medieval words for a longpoem.⁶⁹ There was also *leoducraeft*, the power or skill of chant. Anglo-Saxon lexicographers marked the pagan underpinnings of *leóð-rūne*: “Cockayne translates the word ‘heathen charm,’ according to Toller-Bosworth, who also translates *fondien leódrunen* as ‘incantations’.”⁷⁰ Christine Fell reads *leod-rune* as a variant of the poetic Old English *leodurun* (“sung mystery”).⁷¹ Alaric Hall concurs, “*Leodurun* denotes holy mysteries and the Middle English *leodrone* prophecies...”⁷² But this important word was choked out by persecutory stigma (see chapter 4).

Charmers cured by knotting hanks of colored thread, and by laying on hands, or touching with stones. Some invoked the Nine Maidens, common in healing spells across northern Europe. Audrey Meaney refers to an Old English charm invoking the Nothðæs (Needs), who are Nine Sisters, and compares it to a Danish runic inscription on a pine wand, in which the Nine Needs (*nouthær*) lying on a black stone out on the sea chase away a fever.⁷³ These Need-names might relate to invocation of the Norns, going by two lines in the *Sigrdrífumál*. The

valkyrie Sigrdrífa recommends that runes should be cut “on the nail of the Norn” and “mark your nail with nauð” (the Need-rune).⁷⁴ In an early modern Scottish witch trial, Bessie Smith said that she “charmed the heartfevers” by invoking “the nine maidens that died in the boortree in the Ladywell Bank,” and giving her patients waybur: leat to eat for nine mornings.⁷⁵ “Boortree” is another word for the elder, a tree rich in the goddess lore of Britain, Denmark and Holland.

The Gauls and Old Irish ascribed powers of incantation to women, using nearly identical phrases. A rare Gaulish inscription found in a tomb at Larzac, France, refers to a sisterhood of enchantresses

(*uidlua*). It is a charm inscribed on a lead plaque, with the phrase *bnannom bricto*, “women’s spell.” Historical linguist Yves Lambert derives the spell-name *bricto* from Indo-European **bhregh*, “to declare solemnly.”⁷⁶

Gaulish *Bnannom bricto* has an exact Irish correlate, *brichta ban*, in the *Liber Hymnorum*. This text, attributed to St Patrick but dating several centuries later, is itself a spell, a counter-charm of a Christian monk who chants “Against the spells of women, of smiths and druids.”⁷⁷

women’s spells

Gaulish: *bnannom bricto*
(Plomb de Larzac)

Irish: *brichta ban*
(Liber Hymnorum)

against the spells of women, smiths and druids.

Medieval bishops and canon lawyers attempted to wipe out the peasantry’s use of incantations for vision, blessing, healing, and protection, because those chants had traditionally invoked pagan deities—and because the priesthood now arrogated the chanting of litanies to its own brotherhood: to men alone. The priest singing Mass is performing an incantation that is supposed to magically transform wine and wafer into the body of his god. But the Church claimed that power of enchanting only for a doctrinally restricted brotherhood, denying it to females or people of ecstatic spiritual traditions. Its hierarchy forbade the *incantatrix* to practice the universal human sacrament of invoking Spirit. It slandered the pagan European chants (and sometimes even christianized ones) as devilish. If the

Night Chant of the Diné or the Maori Creation Chant had existed in Europe, they would have attempted to ban them just as they did the enchantment of European wisewomen. And eventually they did.

HEALING WITCHES

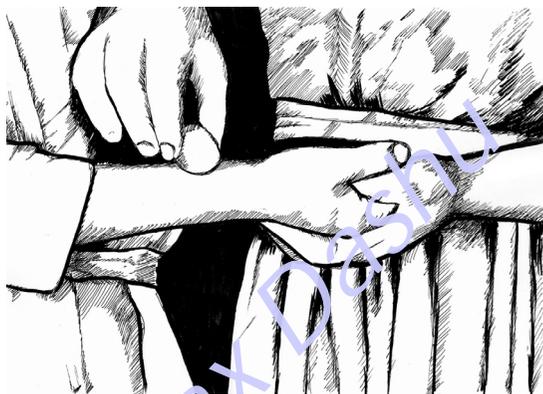
Many witch-titles have to do with medicine and healing. Some mean “herb-woman,” like the Frankish *herbaria* and Spanish *herbolera*, both of which were demonized early on. The *Lex Alamannorum* gives “herbalist” as a synonym for “witch,” in its most negative sense: *stria aut herbaria*. *Stria* (from Latin *strix*, “screech-owl”) was a primary Roman name for “witch.” The priests often rendered *herbaria* as *venefica*, “poisoner,” following old Roman patterns of vilification and demonization.⁷⁸ In eastern Europe, Orthodox missionaries engaged in the same vilification, using other epithets. The Greek priest St Cyril rebuked his Slavic parishioners for going in illness to healers he called “accursed women.”⁷⁹

But the witch-herbalist knew of plants for sickness and binding up wounds, for childbirth and purifying the blood. She brewed herbs and roots to make healing drinks, made salves, and combined these medicines with ceremonial acts, in what is now known as “wholistic healing.” She used knotting on cords, healing belts, rubbing with stones, healing touch, and herbal smudges.⁸⁰ She gathered herbs to bless houses and barns, burned or scattered them, hung wreaths over doors and beams; and tied blessing plants around the necks of cows and other animals.

Penitential books are full of references to people using *ligaturas* (ties) for healing and protection, or wearing bundles of herbs, bones or pieces of iron, as pendants, tied on or sewn into clothing.⁸¹ The *Homilia de Sacrilegis* gives a long list of illnesses and physical problems that were treated by “songs and incantations,” and by various folk remedies, such as hanging amulets such as the “serpent’s tongue around a person’s neck.”⁸²

In Germanic languages, treatment through touch, stroking, and making passes over the body was sometimes called “bettering”: Anglo-Saxon *bētan*, Middle Dutch *böten*, and Old German *puozan* all meant “to remedy, heal.”⁸³ “Among our peasantry there are old women

still who profess *böten*, stroking, pouring, and charming by spells.”⁸⁴ The Welsh had a constellation of words based on the same concept. *Swynaw* meant “to comfort or cure; to charm; to bless; to save harmless,” and also “preserve”; *swynawg*, “possessed of a preserving virtue”; and *swynedigaeth*, “the act of preserving or remedying by some hidden virtue; a preserving by charm.” A woman who did this was called a *daiswynws*.⁸⁵



Healing with a serpent stone, Hungary, mid 20th century. (After Dömötör)

The witches often treated people through animist ceremonies: laying healing stones on sick bodies, passing children through openings in the earth, or by immersions into south-running water. Modern Scottish healers tied black and white thread around the limbs of afflicted people or animals.⁸⁶ Silesian Germans consulted old women called *messerin*, who took their measure with thread, from head to toe and across their outstretched fingertips, to cure consumption.⁸⁷

These shamanic arts did not fade away of their own accord. They were much in demand, and in spite of centuries of repression, they persisted. In birth magic, for example, women used “herbal or animal remedies, amulets, girdle [belt], charms and invocations, physical manipulation and various rites relating to springs and stones.”⁸⁸ The stones could be large boulders or rock “beds” in which women who desired to conceive a child would lie, or small stones that could be tied on the mother’s body, or used in other ways.

Herbal mysteries were the province of the Saxon *lybbestre* and Old German *luppararā*, “female healer.”⁸⁹ These words for healing witches descend from *lyb* and *luppa*, which both mean “vitality,” “medicine.”⁹⁰ *Lyb* is related to the word “life” itself. The Anglo-Saxon verb *libban* (*lybban*) means “to live, be, exist.”⁹¹ It designates “medicine” both in the sense of curative herbs or powders, and as something animated by sacred power. The Icelandic cognate *lyf* could mean either a healing