medicus Cynifrid qui et morienti illi, et eleuatae de tumulo adfuit … referre erat solitus, quod illa infirmata habuerit tumorem maximum sub maxilla; “Iusserunt me,” inquit, “incidere tumorem illum, ut effueret noxius umor, qui inerat … monstrauerunt mihi etiam uulnus incisurae, quod feceram, curatam; ita ut mirum in modum pro aperto et hiante uulnere, cum quo sepulta erat, tenuissima tunc cicatricis uestigia parerent.”

[the physician Cynefrith, who was present both when she [St. Æthelthryth] was dying, and when she was raised from the tomb ... used to recount that, when she was ill, she had a very large swelling under her jaw; “They told me,” he said, “to cut into that swelling, so that the harmful fluid inside would flow out … [and at her translation in 695 or 6] they showed me too the wound of the incision that I had made, healed up, so that, wonderfully, instead of the open and gaping wound with which she had been buried, the slightest traces of a scar were then visible”] (Bede, Historia ecclesiastica IV.19).¹

Bede’s story of the medicus Cynefrith cutting open (incidere) St. Æthelthryth’s swelling in order to aid its healing provides a rare glimpse into the treatment of illness or injury by surgical means in the Anglo-Saxon period. Whether one follows The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition as “the treatment of injuries, deformities or other disorders by manual operation or instrumental appliances,”² or that given by Charlotte Roberts in the most recent published survey of the discipline in Anglo-Saxon England: “the branch of medicine concerned with treating diseases or injuries by means of manual or operative

procedures, especially by incision into the body;”3 we do not find much evidence for surgical treatments in Anglo-Saxon written sources.

Early medieval England was a dangerous environment with a high risk of physical harm, which could result from warfare, day-to-day lawlessness, or accidents in the home or the workplace.4 Anglo-Saxon physicians must have encountered many instances of wounds that called for surgical attention, and one might thus expect to find numerous references to procedures like that undertaken by Cynefrith in the extant medical texts. But medical collections in Old English are dominated by potions and salves of one kind or another, to the almost complete exclusion of techniques involving “the knife.” “There are very few references in Anglo-Saxon sources to surgical operations apart from bloodletting,” wrote M.L. Cameron at the beginning of his chapter on surgery, which is less than five pages long, including extensive translations.5 Cameron is right to point out the rarity of surgical techniques in medical texts compiled in early medieval England: manual and instrumental operations (even generously defined) total only eight in the 155 chapters of Bald’s Leechbook, London, British Library, Royal MS 12 D. xvii (s.xi) (BLB)6 and two in Leechbook III (73 chapters, in the same manuscript).7 Even bloodletting itself is found only eighteen times in BLB and once in Leechbook III.8 The Lacnunga, London, British Library, Harley MS 585 (s.xex–xi),9 features only two instances of scarification, one set


5 M.L. Cameron, Anglo-Saxon Medicine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 169. The chapter extends to p. 173, with over a page taken up by translations from the sources.


7 Cockayne, Leechdoms, 2:300–60.

8 Cameron’s chapter on “The Humours and Bloodletting” is only nine pages long (159–68) and does not offer any examples of therapeutic bloodletting. Lists of lucky and (mostly) unlucky days for bloodletting are now discussed with other prognostics by L.S. Chardonnens, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, 900–1100: Study and Texts (Leiden: Brill, 2007), and Roy Liuzza, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics: An Edition and Translation of Texts from London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A. iii (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011).