

Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann Royal Irish Academy

RIA Library Medical Manuscript Collection

Background

The Royal Irish Academy (RIA) is Ireland's premier learned body. It was founded in 1785, with the Earl of Charlemont as first president. Its royal charter, granted the following year, declared its aims to be the promotion and investigation of the sciences, polite literature, and antiquities, as well as the encouragement of discussion and debate between scholars of diverse backgrounds and interests. The RIA is an independent, all-island learned society of approximately 650 Members, chosen for their distinguished contributions to scholarship and research in the sciences, humanities, social sciences and public service. Membership is by election and considered the highest academic honour in Ireland. An all-Ireland body, the Academy organises conferences, arranges discourses and public lectures, and conducts research.

Medical Manuscripts

Since its foundation in 1785 the Royal Irish Academy has placed an important emphasis on building and maintaining collections of books, archives and other resources which reflect the history and endeavours of our island and its peoples from prehistoric times to the present day. The Library's collection of Irish medical manuscripts is the largest in existence consisting of over 30 items, the majority of which are vellum. The content of these medical treatises originated in various languages and locations around the world, travelling through translation to Ireland. The bulk of the treatises conform to the standard Arabic arrangement of diseases of the body – a capite usque ad pedes ('from head to toe'). The texts deal with anatomy, diagnosis and prognosis, diet and regimen, gynecology, obstetrics and pharmacology, as well as common illnesses and injuries.

Irish practitioners used a very broad range of texts compiled by doctors at the medical schools of Montpellier and Salerno and other English and continental universities from the twelfth to the seventeenth century. They were unusual in translating the texts rather than working from the original Latin as was the norm elsewhere in Europe. The compilations were made for practical purposes – for the use of doctors in the course of their working lives.

The most well-known of these medical manuscripts is the fifteenth-century Book of O'Lees or the Book of Hy-Brasil (RIA MS 23 P 10 (ii)). See Fig.1. This treatise is an Irish translation of a Latin text *Tacuini aegritudinum*, which was itself translated from the Arabic originally written by the Islamic physician Ibn Jazlah (d. 1100) of Baghdad. The text is divided into 44 tables outlining details of diseases, each table is divided into 99 compartments, across, aslant, and vertical. These are coloured red and black, and comprise descriptions of different diseases, showing name, prognosis, stage, symptoms, cures, etc., of the disease in question.



Leabharlann Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
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The Library holds five copies in Irish of the *Lilium Medicinae* written in 1305 by the French physician Bernard of Gordon (d. 1330). The *Lilium* provided physicians with a comprehensive guide to the theory and practice of pathology and therapeutics. The earliest copy (RIA MS 24 P 14) was written in 1577-1578 by Corc Og O Cadhla (d. 1584), a physician practicing in Leinster, and is the only complete Irish *Lilium* in extant. Alongside the text, Corc noted names and places of those he treated. On 22 March 1578, Corc recorded that he treated the two daughters of a chief in Carlow called Brian Caomhánach (d. 1578) for menstrual issues, see Fig.2. Irish medical manuscripts contain only a handful of physician's notes referring to the treatment of patients, in its reference to female patients, Corc's note is unique.

The Aphorisms and Prognostics (Prognostica) of Hippocrates and the text of Aegidius' much-cited work, *De urinis*, which deals with kidney stones, the various colours of urine etc. are represented in a number of the Library's medical manuscripts. One (RIA MS 24 P 22) owned by John McDonald, Co. Antrim, retained the Latin headings and introductory sections as a reference to the original text, the rest of the text being in Irish. McDonald's text contains copious marginal notes and has IOU's from this period scattered throughout the document. See Fig.3.

The Book of O' Shiels (RIA MS 23 K 42) is a compendium of medical treatises. It contains both Hippocrates and Aegidius' works, as well as Bernard of Gordon's *Lilium, particula prima*, on fevers; interspersed by extracts from Valescus de Taranta (1382-1417) of Portugal, the Greek physician Galen (129-216 AD) and Avicenna (d. 1037) the most eminent Muslim physician of his day. See Fig. 4. The O' Shiels were hereditary physicians to the MacMahons of Oriel (Airgialla), in the north-east of Ireland and they used this compendium as a working document. The same applied to most medical manuscripts. These were not prestige works; their purpose was practical.

A final example of the breadth of medical topics covered in the Library's medical manuscript collection, is a Medieval Icelandic treatise entitled 'A medical miscellany of encyclopaedic character' (RIA MS 23 D 43). The compiler made an effort to gather, in one volume, everything of medical science known in his day. The treatise contains charms and conjectures to cure fevers and stop hemorrhaging, a cookbook for medicinal recipes, sections on bloodletting and a leech-book. See Fig. 5.

The article has drawn heavily on Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, 'The 'Book of O' Lees' and other medical manuscripts and astronomical tracts' in *Treasures of the Royal Irish Academy Library* edited by Bernadette Cunningham and Siobhan Fitzpatrick (Dublin, 2009).

Larsen, Henning. *An Old Icelandic Medical Miscellany*. Oslo, 1931.

Appendix 1: Manuscript images

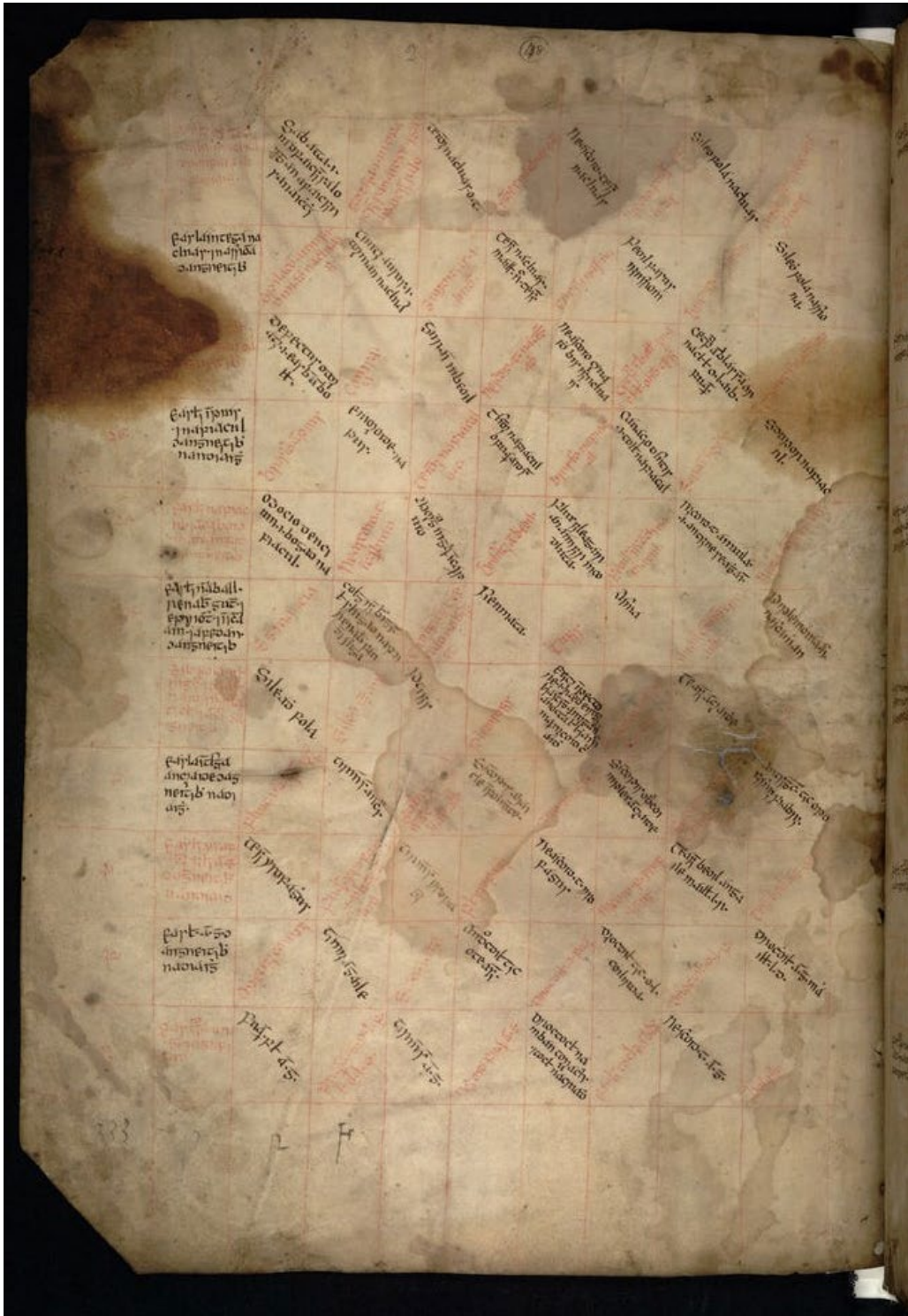


Fig.1 - Book of O'Lees or the Book of Hy-Brasil (RIA MS 23 P 10 (ii)), f.2.

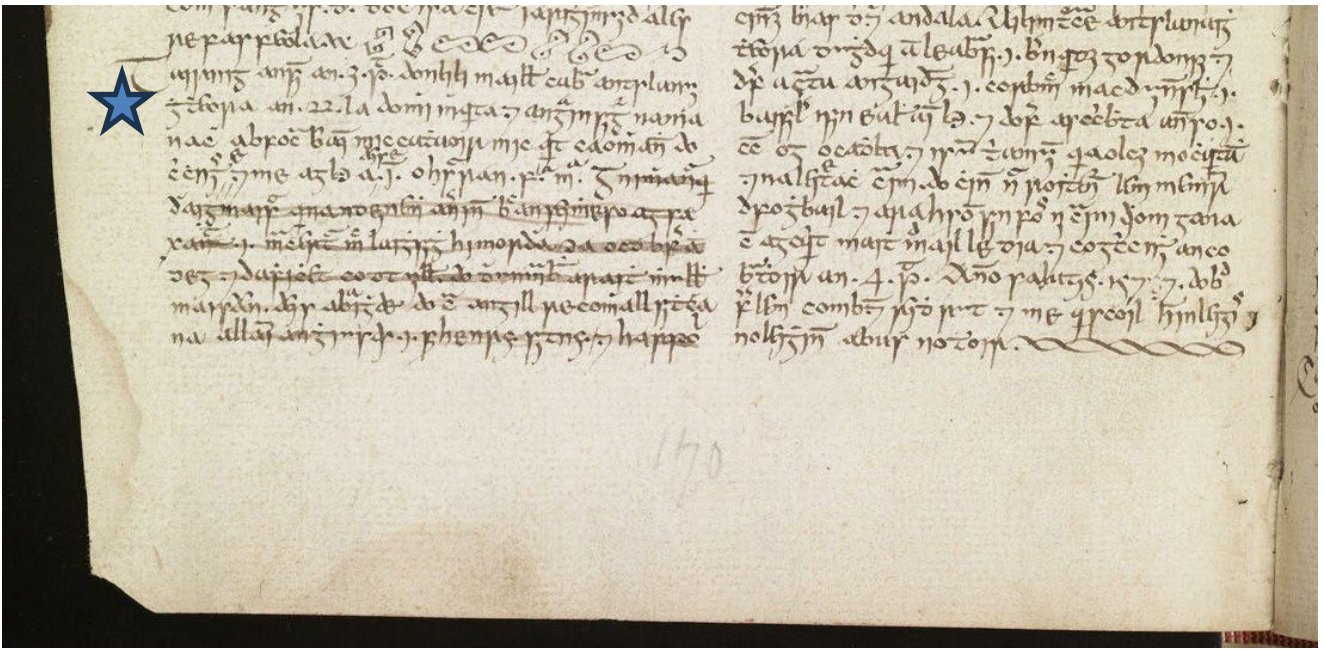


Fig. 2 - *Lilium Medicinae* by Corc Og O Cadhla (RIA MS 24 P 14), p.170. The star marks where the line refers to 22 March 1578.

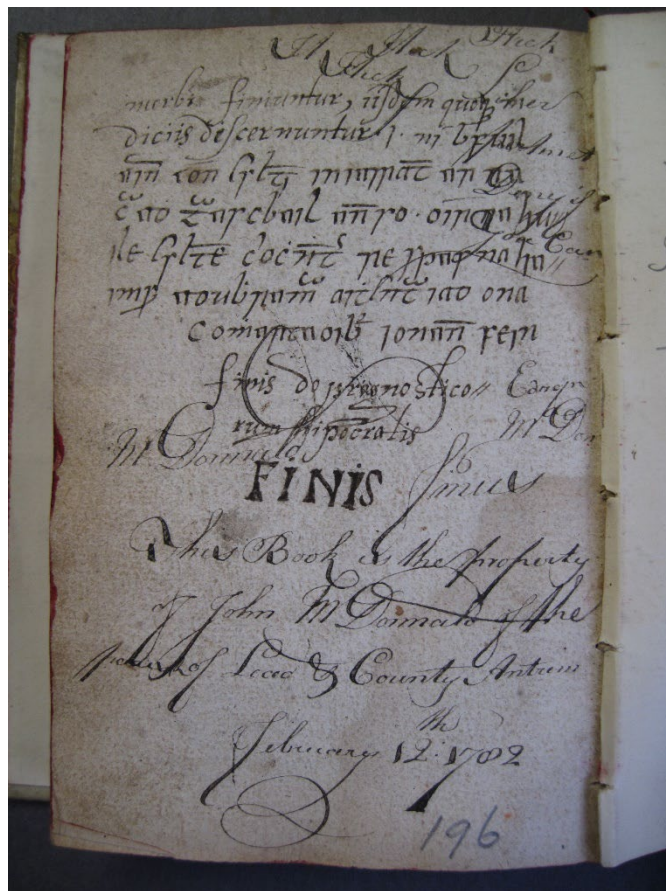


Fig. 3 - *Prognostica* (RIA MS 24 P 22), p.196 attests to the manuscript's ownership by John McDonald.

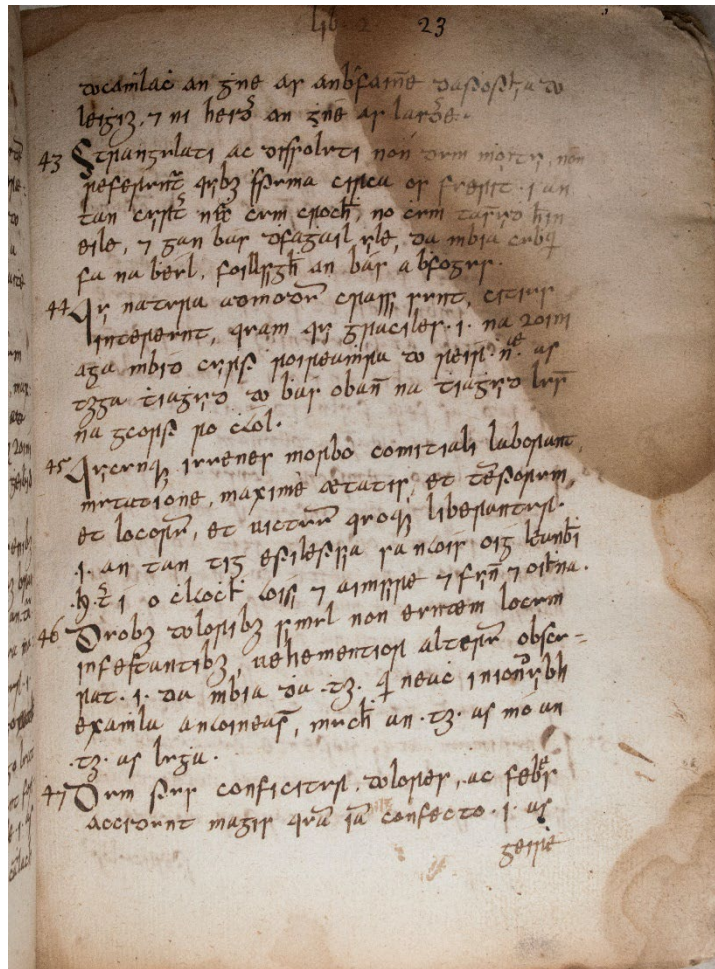


Fig.4 - Book of O' Shiels (RIA MS 23 K 42), p.23.

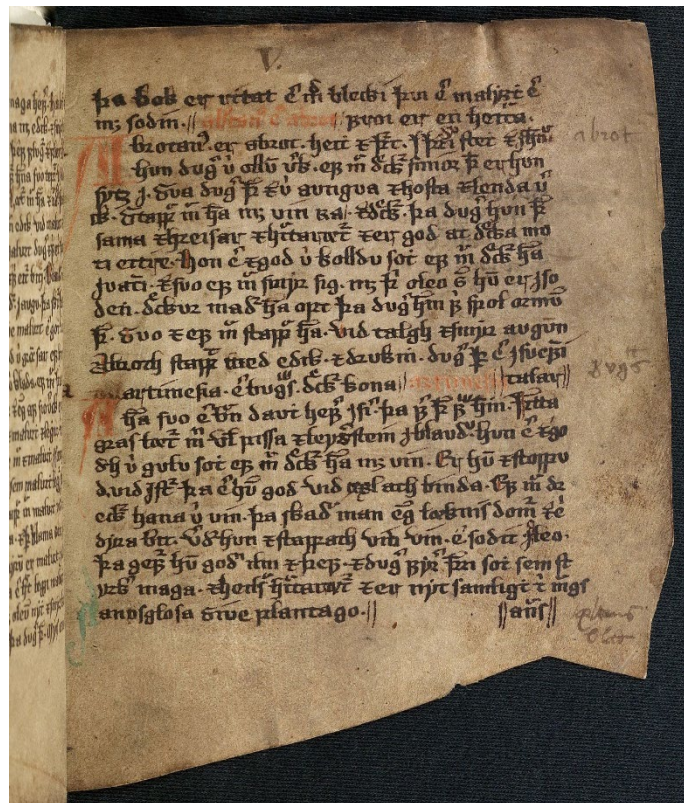


Fig. 5 - Medieval Icelandic treatise (RIA MS 23 D 43), f.10.