

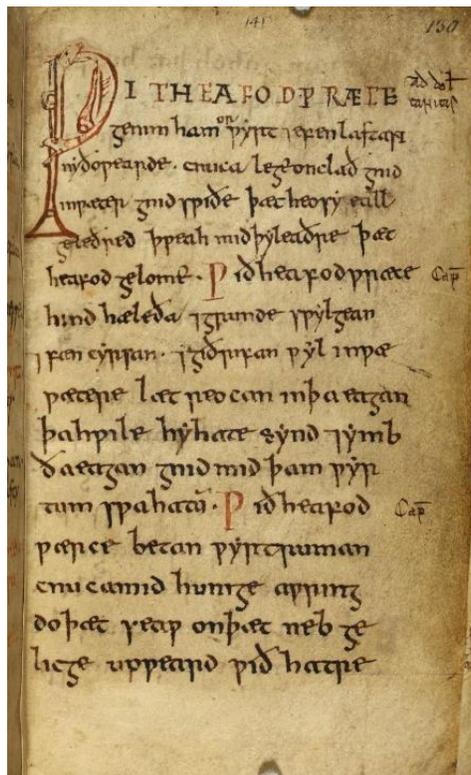
# The Nine-Herb Charm: Nigon Wyrta Galdor

An Herbal Healing Charm circa 900-1000 c.e.

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“A wyrm came slithering, and yet he killed no one,  
for wise Wōden took nine glory-twigs  
and smote the serpent,  
who flew into nine parts!  
There, apple overcame venom:  
There, the wyrm would never find shelter.”

- Nigon Wyrta Galdor from the Lacnunga



- (The Lacnunga', codex MS Harley 585 (folios 160r to 163v) [British Library](#))

## What is the The Ningen Wyrta Galdor:

The Nigon Wyrta Galdor is an old English/Germanic “Galdor” or “Galdr” in Norse, namely a spell or incantation, often a song, accompanied with rites. This particular piece is an herbal remedy whose purpose appears to be to cure a wound or remove a toxin. It was written down

somewhere between the year 900 and 1000 c.e. and is part of the “Lacnunga” manuscript which now resides at the British Library. (Stride, 2017) As with most Galdor, the song and actions are just as important as the physical application of the medicinal plants. In modern English we often refer to this poem as the “Nine Herbs Charm” though that is a somewhat inaccurate translation. Saying it is simply a charm does not truly convey the complexity of this piece. The manuscript is a combination of literature, mythology, folk ritual and herbal medicine preparation instructions. It is also notable that “herb” is not actually an accurate translation of “wyrtr”. Wyrtr is related to the word “wort” which may be familiar from plants we know modernly such as, Saint John’s wort, or mugwort. In the 900s “wyrtr” would have referred to a whole plant, or plants in general, not just what we modernly think of as an “herb.” (Hopkins, J.S., 2023) Thus Ningon (nine) Wyrtra (plant) Galor (Charm.)

The Galdr is intended to be a song, sung at key points in a healing ritual. The “plot” of the Galdr is that an unknown disease or wound has taken the form of a Wyrtr that is attacking the ill person. Wōden is called upon as a healer and commander who gathers the nine herbs (his warriors) to strike at the wyrtr. He strikes the wyrtr with nine “glory twigs,” (which are potentially sticks inscribed with runes.) This blow breaks the wyrtr into nine poisons. Led by Wōden, the nine wyrtrs then rise and defeat each of the poisons respectively, freeing the person from the wound. The scribe then tells us how to prepare the medicine, apply it to the patient and how and when to sing the song. (Hopkins, J.S., 2023)

### **Translations and Difficulties:**

From a literature and translation standpoint, there are a few important things to keep in mind. Firstly, the Lacnunga manuscript that contains this galdor has some ‘corruption’ in that there are missing lines as well as places where the scribe made, or attempted to make, edits, so we do not know what the source material actually looked like. Secondly, in its original Germanic the poem makes use of alliteration which adds a cadence and also may have the somewhat infamous layers of metaphor that are notoriously hard to unravel. Thus, a modern English translation loses some of this complexity. Finally, something that becomes rapidly apparent when researching the nine herbs poem, is that there is a great amount of disagreement about the actual translation. No two translations are exactly the same. One of the elements that vary is what the nine herbs actually were. Translating plant names from 10th century Anglo-Saxon to modern English is, as it turns out, a daunting task. Not only are there the linguistic challenges of the actual translation, but then the actual identification from a botanical standpoint. Universal scientific naming was not around yet. Some plants had many names they were known by, and some plants shared names with other plants. Not to mention the physical change in plants over time, changes in plant population and plant variety over time, etc.

All these things add difficulty to the plant identification process. Most of the herbs are agreed upon, but the ninth “Atterlothe” is fairly contested. It translates to “Poison-hater.” Some frequently suggested plants are Cockspur grass (*Echinochloa crus-galli*), Betony (*Stachys officinalis*) or Viper’s Bugloss or Black nightshade. (Stride, 2017) In the paper “Anglo-Saxon

Medicine and the Nine Herbs Charm in the twenty-first century” Dr. Stride opts for Wood Betony. In my own re-creation I will be doing the same, as wood betony is a more accessible plant, and is also safe to use. Black Nightshade is a common invasive species in Southern California neighborhoods, and is, unfortunately, very available. However, as a nightshade it has enough solanine, especially in the unripe berries, to cause issues if mishandled.

The Poem – Modern English (Translation by Joseph S. Hopkins)

*Remember, Mugwort,  
what you brought to pass,  
what you readied,  
at Regenmeld.*

*You're called Una, that most ancient plant.  
You defeat three, you defeat thirty,  
you defeat venom, you defeat air-illness;  
you defeat the horror who stalks the land.*

*And you, Waybread, plant-mother!  
You're open to the east, yet mighty within:  
Carts creaked over you, women rode over you,  
over you brides bellowed, over you bulls snorted!*

*You withstood it all—and you pushed back:  
You withstood venom, you withstood air-illness,  
you withstood the horror who travels over land.*

*Now, this plant is called Stune, she who grows on stone:  
She defeats venom, she grinds away pain.*

*She's called Stithe, she who withstands venom;  
she chases away malice, casts out pain.*

*This is the plant that fought against the wurm.  
She is mighty against venom, she is mighty against air-illness;  
she is mighty against the horror who travels over land.*

*You, Venom-loathe, go now!  
The less from the great,*

*the great from the less,  
until for both he receives a remedy.*

*Remember, Chamomile,  
what you brought to pass,  
what you accomplished,  
at Alorford,  
that no one should lose their life to disease,  
since for him Chamomile was prepared.*

*Finally, this plant is known as Wergulu,  
who a seal sent over sea-ridges,  
to aid against venom.*

*These nine plants defeat nine venoms!*

*A wyrm came slithering, and yet he killed no one,  
for wise Wōden took nine glory-twigs  
and smote the serpent,  
who flew into nine parts!  
There, apple overcame venom:  
There, the wyrm would never find shelter.*

*Fille and Fennel, a most mighty pair!  
The wise lord shaped these plants,  
while he, holy, hung in the heavens,  
he sent them from the seven worlds, seven ages of man,  
for wretched and wealthy alike.*

*She stands against pain, she stands against venom,  
she is potent against three and against thirty,  
against a foe's hand, against great guile,  
against malice and bewitchment  
from animal and spirit.*

*Now! May the nine plants do battle against nine glory-fleers,  
against nine venoms and against nine air-diseases,  
against the red venom, against the running venom,  
against the white venom, against the blue venom,  
against the yellow venom, against the green venom,  
against the black venom, against the blue venom,*

*against the brown venom, against the purple venom,  
against wyrm-blister, against water-blister,  
against thorn-blister, against thistle-blister,  
against ice-blister, against venom-blister.*

*If any venom comes flying from the east,  
or any comes from the north,  
or any from the west over folk!*

*Christ stood over illness of every kind.  
Yet I alone know water running  
where the nine serpents guard.*

*Now, may all plants arise,  
seas ebb, all salt water,  
when I blow this venom from you.*

### **Preparations – Translated by Joseph S. Hopkins**

*Ingredients: Mugwort, Waybread open to the east, Lamb's Cress, Venom-Loathe, Chamomile, Nettle, Sour-Apple-of-the-Wood, Fille, and Fennel. ashes.*

*Prepare and apply the salve: Work these plants to dust, and mix them with apple mush. Make a paste of water and ashes. Take Fennel and mix the plant into the boiling paste. Bathe the wound with an egg mixture both before the patient applies the salve and after.*

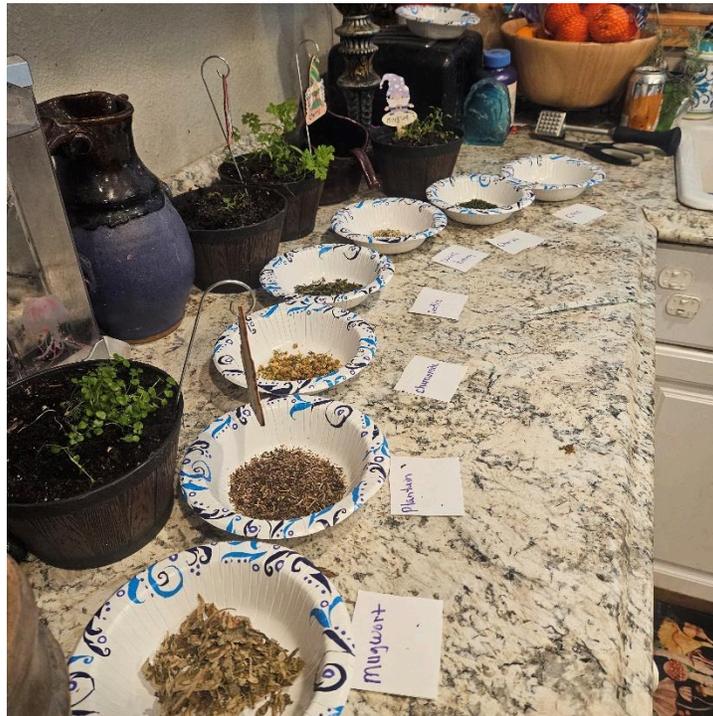
*Sing the above galdor over each of the nine plants. Sing the galdor three times before the patient self-applies the salve, and sing the galdor three times on the apple. Sing the galdor into the patient's mouth, sing the galdor into each of the patient's ears, and—before the patient applies the salve—sing the galdor into the patient's wound.*

### **The Plants:**

Listed by Modern English, Old English and Scientific names

- 1) Mugwort/ mucgwyr (Artemisia vulgaris)
- 2) Plantain/Waybread (Plantago major)
- 3) Watercress/Lombescyrse (Nasturtium officinale)
- 4) Wood Betony/Attorlaðe (Betonica officinalis/Stachys officinalis)

- 5) Chamomile/ mægðe (*Matricaria chamomilla*)
- 6) Nettle/Netelen/Stune (*Urtica* spp)
- 7) Crab Apple/ æppel (*Malus sylvestris*)
- 8) Chervil/ fille (*Anthriscus cerefolium*)
- 9) Fennel/ finule (*Foeniculum vulgare*)



### **Re-Creating the Salve:**

Before we go about re-creating this salve I would like to add a brief disclaimer. This project is being done as experimental archaeology to explore historical herblore, not as a medical treatment. For a real wound, please see a trained medical professional. It was made for my research and experience of historic practices and is not intended for use by others.

**Gathering the plants:** The nine plants were acquired in multiple ways. Some were grown, some harvested from other's gardens, some wild foraged, some purchased in dried form. I have attempted to grow from seed, the mugwort, watercress, plantain, chamomile, chervil and wood betony. Some, like the plantain and mugwort, were not grown enough yet to harvest so I purchased dried versions for the salve. The fennel was harvested from my mother-in-law's garden. The nettle was "wild foraged." It is a common spring weed on my property that I had previously gathered and dried (Note: in my neighborhood it grows in the spring, and is no longer around in July.) The recipe also calls for "old soap" or "ash" depending on the version. Ash mixed with water makes lye. I instead made my fennel paste with a bit of baking soda, still basic,

but less dangerous than lye. I did not have access to fresh crab apples, so I used a jar of crab apple preserves.



**Creating the salve.** I read several different translations of the instructions to try to get the most complete picture possible as well as to have different options to consider for feasibility. As with many period recipes, you will note there are no measurements, or proportions. I chose to do a simple 1:1:1 on all of the herbs, and “enough” apple preserve to get a correct paste consistency. I went for a base on 1 tablespoon of each herb, as this follows the basic guideline of making a tea with modern herbalism for most food safe/culinary herbs. I ground the dry herbs together, added in the fennel paste, then mixed them all into my apple preserve. The result is very sticky, and would make a good poultice to pack a wound.





**The song:** If you count the number of times you have to recite the Galdor in the instructions above, over the herbs, salve and patient, it comes out to 20 times. The poem is over five pages long, and yes, I did all the recitations. I took a video of the creation and abridged it, and it is available to watch in a google file.

Conclusion: I really enjoyed this piece because it felt like it lay at the intersection of so many important aspects of the early Anglo-Saxon culture. This piece is religion, art, science, mythology and more. The process seemed easy to follow, but the instructions were so minimal it's hard to tell. I would like to try it with fresh apple in the future. Overall, this was one of my favorite projects so far!

## References:

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