

BOOK REVIEW

Medieval Military Medicine: From the Vikings to the High Middle Ages by Brian Burfield

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Pen and Sword Military
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Brian Burfield is a freelance historian with a longstanding interest in the medieval period. Here he tackles the history of military medicine over a 500 year period between 800 and 1300.

The book is well structured with eight chapters of well referenced and annotated text, eight central pages of illustrative high-quality coloured plates, a helpful seven page glossary of 'Chroniclers, Surgeons and Miracle Collections', fifty two pages of detailed notes, a thirteen page bibliography and an accurate index. In other words, a serious effort to provide a comprehensive analysis of this subject.

Of course there are major challenges from researching this period, not least the paucity of textual material available and the difficulties faced in verifying such historical data. In the first two chapters the author explains these challenges and gives the rationale for including the main and secondary sources that he uses. These include the *Bald's leechbook*, an English text transcribed in the mid-tenth century, and *Leechbook III*, from the earlier part of the period selected, through to more surgical texts of Roger Frugard, Theodoric of Bologna and William of Saliceto from the 12th and 13th centuries. It isn't clear how much military experience has been involved in the earlier works. The author has an interest in Viking sagas and poetry and medical anecdotes from these are utilised extensively.

The middle chapters cover familiar surgical topics including wounds, operative treatment, fractures, disability and infection. Venereal disease and syphilis are discussed but surprisingly typhus, the scourge of many an army in later centuries, doesn't merit inclusion. The notable challenge to the theory of 'laudable pus' outlined by Theodoric for wound management in the 13th century is included.

The final chapter 'Tormented Minds' relies most heavily on sagas, poetry and songs and is a helpful attempt to identify PTSD in this time period. The incredible variety of treatments used to treat this malady included: eating radish with salt and vinegar, trepanation of the skull to release harmful vapours and the early use of music therapy by the Iraqi physician, Ishaq Ibn Imran.

Overall, this is a fascinating read and a worthy addition to the small corpus of works on this subject.

Bryan Rhodes
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