

# How safe was Medieval Surgery?

## Guided Reading

Title		Summarise
	<p>Surgery during the Middle Ages was most commonly practiced by the barber surgeon. These surgeons would learn by becoming an apprentice, they would then watch and copy a master surgeon. These barber surgeons would carry out procedures such as: bloodletting , a form of surgery where a patient would be bled; amputation; trepanning, where a hole was drilled into the skull to let out demons causing headaches and epilepsy and cauterisation , where a hot iron would burn a wound in order to stop the flow of blood. New ideas on surgery were recorded in books, written in Latin. These books spread quickly and by the end of the 14th century English surgeons could read about the ideas of many surgeons. One such book was <i>practica</i>, published by the English surgeon, John of Ardenne, in 1376. This book was based on his knowledge of Greek and Arab medicine, as well as his personal experience during the 100 years war.</p> <p>Another way in which a surgeon learnt their practice was during times of war, with the vast majority of surgery being carried out on the battlefield. Medieval Europe was a place of frequent warfare. Medieval warfare was brutal, with limbs and extremities hacked by swords and pole axes and pierced by arrows and spears. As such surgeons were in high demand. As a result surgical techniques somewhat improved during the Middle Ages. Indeed, it was not uncommon to see men with amputated limbs going about their business in Medieval towns.</p> <p>Surgery in the Medieval period was a risky affair, although a patient could rely on basic painkiller made from natural substances like mandrake, opium and hemlock could be used, an effective anesthetic had not yet been invented. As a result patients felt the full pain of flesh and bone being cut away. Surgeons needed to have patients held or tied down so that they could perform their duties. Germ theory and antiseptic would not be invented until the 19th century so the risk of dying of infection following a successful surgery was a common occurrence, therefore surgery in everyday life was seen as a last resort. This is not to say that all Medieval surgeries resulted in death, indeed the fact that surgeons regularly operated on patients is evidence enough that success was common. As well as the high number of amputated former soldiers there are records of successful surgeries to remove breast cancer , bladder stones and hemorrhoids being carried out at the time.</p> <p>Galenic ideas promoted the view that pus in a wound was a sign of healing. This was challenged by the Italian surgeons Hugh of Lucca, and his son Theodoric of Lucca. Hugh served in the army of the Fifth Crusade fighting in Egypt. Through the use of observation he noted how pus was not a good sign of healing, instead he encouraged wounds to be cleaned and treated with bandages soaked in wine. This was a form of rudimentary antiseptic which helped fight off infection. His son Theodric built upon these ideas in his book <i>cirurgia</i>, published in 1267. Here he challenged the notion of 'praiseworthy pus', that being that pus in a wound was a sign of healing. Here he noted down a method of diagnosing shoulder dislocation in which the patient should attempt to touch the opposite ear from a suspected dislocated arm. This method is still employed today. However as their ideas went against Galenic principles their popularity was somewhat limited.</p>	

## Sources

**A** For it is not necessary that bloody matter (pus) be generated in wounds -- for there can be no error greater than this, and nothing else which impedes nature so much, and prolongs the sickness.

**Theodoric of Lucca, *Cirurgia* (1267)**

**B** During very hot weather blood-letting should not be undertaken because humours flow out quickly as the bad. Nor should it be done in very cold weather, because the good humours are compacted in the body and difficult to draw out. If the blood appears black, draw it off until it becomes red. If it is thick, until it thins out: if watery, until it becomes thick. This clears the mind, rids the body of poisonous matter and brings long life.

**Extract from manuscript giving instruction to doctors (1230)**

**C** The *Cutting of the Stone*, a 15th century painting by Hieronymus Bosch, a Dutch Painter, here it shows a surgeon carrying out a medical procedure..



## Scholarship

**Elma Brenner, *The transmission of medical culture in the Norman Worlds, 1090-1250*, (2017)**

There is much evidence for the transmission of medical knowledge in the Medieval period. The dissemination of medical knowledge was done through the circulation of scholarly texts, letters and artefacts. Learning from these texts and becoming an expert in these fields afforded a person respect, indeed it was during the Middle Ages that the professional role of the surgeon was developed. Transmission of knowledge was fundamentally important to all sectors of Medieval society

**Scott Michael Rank, *The 5 Most Painful Medieval Treatments* (2020)**

It was not a very pleasant period to be a medical patient. The common way to relieve pain amongst sick people was to inflict more pain upon them, and then hope to the stars for a bit of luck. The medicine was basic, and the terrible illness that plagued those times was complex. Ultimately, this led to the creation of some very excruciating medical treatments.

### Task 1

Read through the **guided reading**. For each paragraph, you need to create a 'title' on one side, and a short summary (two bullet points maximum) on the other.

### Task 2

Look at **source A, B, and C**. In your book, write a short description of the message of each source. Then answer the question "What do these sources tell you about Medieval surgery?"

### Task 3

Read through the interpretations of Medieval surgery. Highlight what you think are the most important sentence is in each source. In your book, answer the question "What do historians say about life in Outremer?"