

Medicine in the Middle Ages (Europe and the Middle East)

Sources: History Alive: Section 10.8, *The Measly Middle Ages* Handout, and Questions from *The Doctor* DVD

Read the following excerpt from Usamah Ibn Munqidh's autobiography. Usamah was a Muslim warrior and courtier, who fought against the Crusaders with Saladin. Yet as a resident of the area around Palestine, he also had a chance to befriend a number of them. His autobiography dates from around 1175.

They brought before me a knight in whose leg an **abscess** had grown; and a woman afflicted with **imbecility**. To the knight I applied a small **poultice** until the abscess opened and became well; and the woman I put on diet and made her humor wet. Then a Frankish physician came to them and said, "This man knows nothing about treating them." He then said to the knight, "Which wouldst thou prefer, living with one leg or dying with two?" The latter replied, "Living with one leg." The physician said, "Bring me a strong knight and a sharp ax." A knight came with the ax. And I was standing by. Then the physician laid the leg of the patient on a block of wood and bade the knight strike his leg with the ax and chop it off at one blow. Accordingly he struck it-while I was looking on-one blow, but the leg was not severed. He dealt another blow, upon which the marrow of the leg flowed out and the patient died on the spot. He then examined the woman and said, "This is a woman in whose head there is a devil which has possessed her. Shave off her hair." Accordingly they shaved it off and the woman began once more to eat their ordinary diet-garlic and mustard. Her imbecility took a turn for the worse. The physician then said, "The devil has penetrated through her head." He therefore took a razor, made a deep **cruciform** incision on it, peeled off the skin at the middle of the incision until the bone of the skull was exposed and rubbed it with salt. The woman also expired instantly. Thereupon I asked them whether my services were needed any longer, and when they replied in the negative I returned home, having learned of their medicine what I knew not before.

Vocabulary

abscess-

imbecility-

poultice-

cruciform-

Summary of the Primary Source	Why is this significant? How does this help you understand the history of medicine?
What were some of the common treatments or “cures” used by Medieval doctors in Europe?	What treatments do you think a Muslim doctor would have used on these patients?
Considering what you know about European doctors treating the plague: How have medicine and the treatment of patients by doctors changed today? How do doctors treat patients today?	