
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XC
for 2001



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Cambridge Antiquarian Society**

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

**Volume XC
for 2001**

Editor Alison Taylor

Published by the Cambridge Antiquarian Society 2001

ISSN 0309-3606

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Editorial

Last year's Proceedings followed the theme of landscape history and this one is even more tightly focused, concentrating on religion in Cambridgeshire in the last 2000 years. This is in celebration of the Millennium (which we all know is really this year). It also gives us a chance to show the breadth of the Society's approaches to the past, for papers include orthodox archaeological excavation (of a Romano-Celtic temple), a more unusual exploration of objects from the dust beneath King's College Chapel, and a survey of the architecture and history of all the bell-frames in the (old) County. We are also able to set out the 1291 Valuation of the Diocese of Ely, which will be of great benefit to medieval historians, to take a look at evidence for the fascinating topic of Anglo-Saxon minsters and to examine the truth behind the legends of St Guthlac of Crowland. For something quite different we have a final paper on a 20th century mosque in Cambridge, as multi-faith culture returns to Britain.

Alison Taylor

President's Address

The sudden death of Tim Potter early last year, and the sad loss of his scholarly interest in the Roman Fens, was acknowledged by CAS in two ways: through the lecture by his colleague and fellow excavator of Stonea, Ralph Jackson, and through selection of Roman Cambridgeshire as the topic for the March conference. The publication of the British Museum's epic volume on their investigations at Stonea and of this Society's volume on Roman Cambridge provided a new level of knowledge against which many recent excavations can be compared. The conference on Roman Cambridgeshire revealed how some had made sense of this new data, fitting it into the context known from previous research and testing established models with fresh evidence. A number of common themes seemed to run through the papers that were delivered at this conference, most notably the importance of East Anglia as the bread basket for the Roman Empire, exporting grain to its garrisons on the Rhine and Hadrian's Wall, the need to store and defend this grain contributing to the development of town defences in the 4th century as the burden of taxation for the local population became increasingly oppressive.

Cambridge Antiquarian Society needs to stimulate such synthesis and debate because the present system of excavation and reporting controlled by the needs of modern economic development has become formulaic, a mechanistic response driven by a planning process with little regard to furthering archaeological research or rewarding academic endeavour. It is essential that CAS encourages active involvement in archaeology by its membership (both amateur and professional), and combines this with knowledge and experience of members who come from other disciplines. The Society needs to act as an intermediary to encourage exchange of information so that clarity can be established, particularly with regard to major research questions. Cambridge Antiquarian Society has been a lead organisation in the study and preservation of Cambridgeshire's heritage for the past 160 years; the Society began the collections that led to creation of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and it was CAS who provided money for the first lectureship in Archaeology to be established at the University. Through its two annual conferences, its Proceedings and Conduit it is still the body that presents the results of excavations and other research to both the academic and public world, with dissemination of this information stretching to universities throughout the globe through its system of exchanging periodicals. Compared to such a record the recent vacillations in local government provision and legislative framework for protection of our heritage reveals how important it is to have continuity and democratic scrutiny. The Society is proud of its tradition of knowledgeable independence and must not be beguiled into believing it has no right to represent views at the highest levels when the need arises.

Tim Malim

Felix's Life of St Guthlac: Hagiography and/or Truth

Audrey L Meaney

*Midway between the island and the mainland we
passed Capraria, a dreary place, where
there are men who shun the light and call themselves
'monks'.*

*They have taken their name from the Greek which
means 'alone' because they wish to live with no one;
they fear fortune, whether good or evil.
Would a man live in misery to escape it?
Because of their fear, they shun what is good.
Such reasoning is the raving of a madman.
Whether they are evil men who demand
punishment for their sins or whether their sad hearts
are burdened with black bile, I cannot say ...
Whatever their reasons, I find them strange.*

Rutilius Claudius Namatianus, 'Concerning His
Return', (Isbell 1971:233)

*Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph [of Panephrisis] and said
to him, 'Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a lit-
tle, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can I
purify my thoughts. What else can I do?
Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards
heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said
to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame'.*

Ward 1975:103

Introduction

In 1998, members of the Society for Medieval
Archaeology visited Castellion in the Judaean Desert
and were told the story of its foundation by St Sabas,
as recounted by Cyril of Scythopolis (VS 27):

In the fifty-fourth year of the life of ... Sabas ...[he]
went to the hill of Castellium ... [which] was ... un-
frequented because of the large number of demons
who lurked there, so that none of the shepherds in
the desert dared to go near the place. The revered old
man, however, ... stayed during the season of Lent;
and by his ceaseless prayers ... the place was tamed.¹

This is very reminiscent of Guthlac's occupation of
Crowland in the East Anglian fens, as recounted by
Felix in his Life of that saint:

His heart ... burned ... to make his way to the desert.
... A man ... whose name was Tatwine, declared that
he knew an island in the more remote and hidden

parts of that desert; many had attempted to dwell
there, but had rejected it on account of the unknown
portents of the desert and its terrors of various
shapes ... No settler had been able to dwell alone in
this place before Guthlac ... began to inhabit the
desert.²

Moreover, St Cuthbert, according to an anonymous
monk of Lindisfarne, after living in the monastery
there for some years,

desiring a solitary life, went to the island called
Farne, which is in the midst of the sea ... a place
where before this, almost no one could remain alone
for any length of time on account of various illusions
caused by devils. But he fearlessly put them to flight.³



*Figure 1. Members of the Society for Medieval
Archaeology 1998, hearing the story of St Sabas at
Castellion, in the Judaean desert from Dr Uzi
Dahari. Photograph by the author.*



*Figure 2. St Sabas' foundation of Mar Saba, in the
Judaean desert, 1998. Photograph by the author.*

However, Cuthbert's struggle against demons is perfunctory, and indeed might seem superfluous, since Aidan had apparently previously used Farne as a retreat.⁴

It has long been recognised that, though the *Life of Guthlac* is a primary source, composed within a decade or two of the saint's death, Felix was writing in a hagiographic tradition which went back several centuries,⁵ and that much of his work is copied verbally or adapted from earlier saints' *Lives*. Therefore, what is often cited as historically true on Felix's evidence may not be anything of the kind.

There can be no doubt that all these three accounts have been affected by the mid-4th century *Life of Antony*,⁶ claimed as the 'most widely read and influential book in the history of the Christian church (with the exception of the Bible)'.⁷ Antony is said to have been born about AD 250, and to have lived for 105 years, dying in 356. According to his *Life*, the saint, even before the founding of monasteries, withdrew into the Egyptian desert to escape the company of men and to worship God uninterrupted, and there had to resist many attacks by devils. Cyril of Scythopolis knew Antony's *Life* in the Greek of Athanasius, written about 357⁸; Cyril wrote his own *Life of Sabas* (who was born in 439 and lived for 97 years, dying in 532) between 555 and his own death in 558.

Western hagiographers knew Antony's *Life* in the 'free Latin version' of Evagrius of Antioch, completed by 374.⁹ An anonymous monk of Lindisfarne wrote a *Life of Cuthbert* (c. 634–687) between 699 and 705.¹⁰ Guthlac's death is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (hereafter ASC)¹¹ in 714, and we can work out that he was born about 675 from details in his *Life* by Felix, who was probably a monk living in East Anglia. He wrote between about 730 and 740,¹² in the contemporary 'ornate and bombastic' style of Anglo-Latin.

It seems useful to compare Guthlac's with these earlier *Lives*, in order to try to put his *Life* (and indeed, life) into context. Though not the only works dealing with anchoritic and ascetic saints, they form a neatly varied group, illustrating the development of a hagiographic tradition: the earliest (Antony); one from the Middle Eastern tradition (Sabas); and one very closely related to Felix's Guthlac, and probably written within the same milieu (the Anonymous Cuthbert).¹³ Because I am concerned with the pattern of the saints' lives, I am concentrating on the primary versions: Athanasius' Antony; the anonymous Cuthbert; Felix's Guthlac, not any of the Old English treatments. Though Felix knew of Evagrius' Latin *Life of Antony* and Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, he did not know the Anonymous *Life*, nor the *Life of Sabas*. A H Olsen has shown that hagiography is a literary genre, whose conventions and constant elements, especially the miraculous, have often proved difficult for modern critics. However, the *Lives* should be judged like any other literary works, for their 'narrative tightness' and their effectiveness in conveying the Christ-likeness of their subjects.¹⁴

There are, of course, considerable differences between the four *Lives*, since each purports to be an individual biography; and the variations will help us distinguish what is likely to be historical in Guthlac's *Life*. Felix is also directly indebted to many other previous hagiographers. Thacker has ably demonstrated the range of borrowings,¹⁵ but I shall only comment on parallels where necessary. In particular, I am not going to discuss here the borrowing of vocabulary, either from Latin or Greek, since I am concerned with events.¹⁶ Therefore, all my quotations are from modern English translations. Since Felix's *Life of Guthlac* is my main concern, I shall largely ignore hagiographic elements not present in it. In trying to disentangle the historically true from the symbolic and conventional, I am not decrying the genre, but attempting to illustrate its methods.

Felix's *Life* is by no means a mere patchwork of hagiographic motifs; he stated in his Prologue that he based his account of Guthlac on the evidence of 'credible witnesses. ... a most reverend Abbot Wilfrid and a priest Cissa', and he cited these two again as Guthlac's 'frequent visitors' when he began to describe Guthlac's life on Crowland (VG XXVIII). He gives enough circumstantial detail to indicate that he had at least paid a visit to the 'island', and indeed his *Life* often seems to reflect a closeness to the saint, and represents at least an interpretation of real events. There is also evidence that the Anglo-Saxon milieu has affected Felix's *Life*, not only in a literary way (for example, similarities to aspects of *Beowulf*¹⁷), but also in 'folkloric' background.

Prologues

All the four *Lives* discussed begin with a Prologue setting out their 'cause, purpose, sources and method', and all employ the modesty *topos* of obeying a request or command. Athanasius and the anonymous author of Cuthbert's *Life* added that they wished their readers to have good examples to copy. Cyril differs in so much as his *Life of Sabas* comes after his *Life of Euthymius*, and both were written for the same Abba George. Moreover, Cyril wanted people to pray to — or through — the saints, rather than to imitate them.

Felix stated in his Prologue that he wrote at the command of 'his lord' Ælfwald, king of the East Angles, who ruled from about 713 to 749.¹⁸ Little is known of Ælfwald, but he wrote to Boniface, some time after 747, promising prayers from the monasteries of his kingdom,¹⁹ and so was presumably a pious man. He was the son of the previous king, Aldwulf,²⁰ whose daughter Ecgburh, an abbess (Felix tells us) sent gifts to Guthlac (VG XLVIII), presumably not long before he died; and Guthlac declared his affection for her (VG L). Perhaps it was because of his sister's friendship with Guthlac that the East Anglian Ælfwald asked Felix to write the *Life* of a Mid Anglian saint. The 12th-century *Liber Eliensis* calls Ecgburh Abbess of Repton, but this is in a passage taken directly from Felix's *Life of Guthlac* and is probably pure guess-work.²¹ Whitelock suggested²² that she more probably presided over an East Anglian foundation;

however, if Ecgburh had been at Repton while Guthlac was there it would provide a plausible context for their acquaintance.

Birth and Childhood

Like Antony and Sabas (but perhaps unlike Cuthbert²³) Guthlac was the son of noble and wealthy Christian parents; his father was descended from the royal Mercian line.²⁴ Guthlac's later friendship with Æthelbald is confirmatory evidence for an aristocratic origin. Felix tells us that at the time of Guthlac's birth, in the Mid Anglian district, a golden hand was seen stretching down from heaven to a cross in front of the house door, and this was taken to be a presage of future glory. Neither Antony, Sabas nor Cuthbert had such a portent at his birth, and it seems to have been adapted from Eddius Stephanus' description, in the *Life of Wilfrid* (probably written between 710 and 720), of a bright light which illuminated the house where the saint was born.²⁵ George Henderson considers Guthlac's portent to be quite disproportionate, perhaps reflecting his potential political importance;²⁶ Guthlac was, after all, a member of the group of *æpelings*, from among whom kings were chosen, by virtue of his descent from Icel.²⁷

However, it sometimes appears that royal ancestry is, if not a prerequisite, certainly a useful contributory factor in the attribution of Anglo-Saxon sanctity, and it must be Guthlac's future status as a saint which is primarily being signalled. The 'hand from heaven' is a recognised motif, at first often used in the iconography of Abraham's intended but prevented sacrifice of Isaac.²⁸ Thacker claims that Felix showed Guthlac to be (like Wilfrid) 'predestinate, marked out by grace in his mother's womb', according to Augustinian ideas dominant in the west;²⁹ Olsen suggests that Guthlac was mythicized, like other historical figures regarded as heroes.³⁰ What is important about this birth portent is that it is patently a hagiographic device, intended to express the underlying truth of the Christ-likeness of the saint.³¹ We do not believe it; whether Felix's Anglo-Saxon readers (some of whom must surely have been sophisticated enough to recognise elements of the genre) believed in it literally, is in a way immaterial.

Secular life and the decision to withdraw from it

Like Antony, Guthlac was described as a model child (VG I–XV); but, as befitted his rank, at the age of about fifteen, Felix says, Guthlac 'changed his disposition' and remembered 'the valiant deeds of heroes of old'. He collected together a gang and raided the homes of his enemies, amassing immense booty; however, 'as if instructed by divine counsel' he returned one third of what he took to the previous owners (VG XVI–XVII). Felix seems to be somewhat uncomfortable about this period of his hero's life, but there is no suggestion — as there may be in Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Martin* — that someone who had been a fighting soldier was tainted and unworthy of ecclesiastical office. Martin had joined the army at the same age as Guthlac, but according to his hagiographer, unwillingly; he is not described as taking part in warfare. Finally, after bap-

tism, and when battle was imminent, Martin had refused to fight.³²

Felix describes Guthlac's raiding as if he were fighting on his own account (VG XVII), but Roberts has pointed out that 'the name Guthlac occurs among the signatories to two grants', generally accepted as genuine, made in 691 or 692 by Æthelred of Mercia to Bishop Otfor of Worcester. Though there is no certainty that the signatory Guthlac was the future saint, at this time Guthlac may have been Æthelred's man. Roberts believed that his fighting probably took place on the western borders of Mercia,³³ where there was certainly trouble during these years. Felix says companions came to join Guthlac from 'various races and from all directions'; if so, he must have had a reputation as a successful leader. However, Felix's later statement that Guthlac had lived as an exile among the Britons (VG XXXIV) may indicate that later he opposed the Mercian king, or had come under suspicion of being a pretender.³⁴ In spite of the parallels to the *Life of Martin*, and the general lack of external evidence for Guthlac's existence, Felix's specific statements about this period of his life can probably be accepted.

After nine years of warfare, Felix tells us, Guthlac had worn out his enemies, and began to be troubled. One night he was

as usual anxiously contemplating mortal affairs in earnest meditation, when suddenly ... a spiritual flame ... began to burn in this man's heart. For when, with wakeful mind, he contemplated the wretched deaths and the shameful ends of the ancient kings of his race ... and also the fleeting riches of this world and the contemptible glory of this temporal life, then in imagination the form of his own death revealed itself to him. ... Suddenly, he vowed that, if he lived until the next day, he would himself become a servant of Christ. (VG XVIII)

For Thacker, Felix's account of this conversion represents 'God's predestinating will triumph[ing] over the devil'.³⁵ He contrasts Antony's conflicts, which he believes represent a 'genuine internal struggle', with Guthlac's, which he considers external. It is true that Antony's reasons for taking up a hermit's life were different: he had lived quietly at home until after his parents died, and was then influenced by Christ's instruction to the rich to give everything to the poor (VA 2–3). He moved gradually towards perfection. Sabas committed himself to the monastic life at the early age of eight when he fled from the squabbles of guardian uncles (VS I). Cuthbert is described as having been encouraged towards the monastic life by a series of miracles (AVC I.iii–vi).

Given the variations, and in spite of the differences in theology in the different periods and places, the reasons for their decisions to withdraw from the world could well come close to reality, and Guthlac's has the ring of psychological truth. He might have recalled that Penda, the last pagan king of Mercia, had been defeated and killed, with thirty *duces regii*, by the Northumbrians in 655 (HE III.24), and that Wulfhere's attack on Northumbria had failed (HE IV.12).

Henderson has conjectured that there was a pragmatic (or perhaps not entirely voluntary) reason for his decision to take up a clerical life in order to remove himself from the list of candidates for kingship;³⁶ if so, it was not Felix's concern. It seems to me not impossible that someone of a sensitive nature, engaged in the horrors of primitive warfare, should react against it when time allowed for reflection, as Felix tells us Guthlac did. It has been claimed that about a quarter of 'rough sleepers' at the present time are veterans of war.

Early monastic life

At the age of twenty, Antony chose to live as a hermit close to his own village (VA 2–3), studying the scriptures, praying, labouring to support himself and the poor, and getting advice from those already committed to asceticism. This corresponds to the time the later saints spent in cenobitic monasteries before retiring to eremitic life in the 'desert'. Cuthbert went to Melrose in 651, when he was about 17 years old;³⁷ Guthlac to Repton, where he received the Petrine tonsure under the Abbess Ælfthryth (VG XX). Felix thus provides virtually the only textual evidence that there was a double monastery at Repton about the year 700. However, it may have been founded between 675 and 692 by a *princeps* Friduricus on land granted to Hædda, abbot of Breedon (who had been a priest of *Medehamstede*, later Peterborough), as part of missionary work.³⁸ Repton was associated with the Mercian royal family; Penda's son Merewalh, king of the Magonsæte, was said to have been buried there about 685.³⁹ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that Æthelbald was also buried there in 757⁴⁰ (because of its connection with Guthlac?). A carved stone, almost certainly part of a memorial cross for Æthelbald, has been found there, and on one of the narrow sides is a nightmarish representation of the mouth of Hell, rather reminiscent of Guthlac's vision.⁴¹

The main fabric of the present crypt of the church has been recognised as the royal burial chamber (and perhaps also a baptistery), dating from the first half of the 8th century.⁴² Excavations by the Biddles in the 1970s and 80s have found evidence of two earlier ma-

sonry buildings, both built of local red-brown Bunter stone with yellowish clay instead of mortar. One (in the vicarage garden) was a two-celled mausoleum aligned east-west; the other, more or less in line with it, was destroyed probably in the early 8th century and its stones used in the construction of a new church otherwise built of lighter Keuper stone. The earlier building had had white plaster on its inner walls and glass in its windows,⁴³ and had probably been itself a church, maybe that in which Guthlac worshipped. Other 7th-century minster buildings seem to have reused a large timber hall.⁴⁴

Felix tells us that Guthlac's renunciation of alcohol, after he had been tonsured, earned him the hatred of his fellow monks, but he went on to be a good student of the scriptures and the monastic routine for two years (VG XX–XXII). Felix seems concerned to demonstrate Guthlac's moderation, and does not describe any adventures or miracles during this period of initiation. Like Antony (VA 4), however, he 'sought to imitate the individual virtues of each one of those who dwelt with him: the obedience of one, the humility of another' (VG XXIII).⁴⁵

Sabas also learnt the psalter and the monastic rule (VS 2) but began his ascetic life by fasting and labouring, renouncing (not alcohol but) apples, and surviving a fiery furnace — his infancy miracle? (VS 3–5). In his eighteenth year (VS 6) he wished to join a *laura* (a community of hermits) in the desert, but was told he was too young, and was sent to a cenobitic monastery, where he again prayed, fasted and laboured hard (VS 7–8). His parents vainly tried to persuade him to join



Figure 3. Guthlac is tonsured. (Drawing after the late 12th century Guthlac Roll (British Library Harley Y6).)

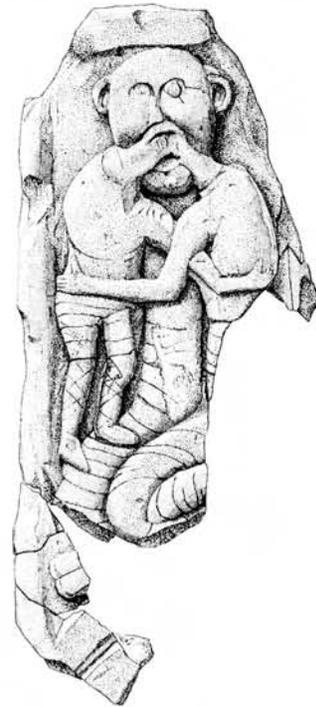


Figure 4. The mouth of Hell as shown on the Repton Stone. Drawn by J Doble, reproduced by kind permission of Prof. M Biddle and Mrs B Kjolbe-Biddle.

his father's military profession (*VS* 9). Cuthbert, like Antony (*VA* 3), prayed and fasted constantly, but seems as a monk to have continued to lead an eventful life with much miraculous help (*AVC* II.i–viii). Eata then invited him to go to the monastery on Lindisfarne, where the miracles continued (*AVC* III.i).

The impulse to the anchoritic life

After an unspecified period Antony moved to 'the tombs which lay at some distance from the village'. He arranged with a friend to lock him into one of them, and to provide him with bread at long intervals (*VA* 8). After spending about thirteen years in the cenobium, Sabas received permission to live in a cave for five days a week, where, without taking food with him, he wove fifty palm-leaf baskets each week (*VS* 10). When thirty-five, he withdrew to the eastern desert, to intensify his ascetic life. Cuthbert chose an equally deserted spot, given the difference between the British landscape and the Middle Eastern: going, as already stated, 'to the island called Farne, which is in the midst of the sea' (*AVC* III.i).

After two years at Repton, Felix tells us, Guthlac decided to seek the desert in order to emulate the 'solitary life of monks of former days' about whom he had read (*VG* 24). The Latin *Life of Antony* and perhaps Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit*⁴⁶ both seem (along with other hagiographical writings extolling the anchoritic and ascetic life) to have been readily available in the monasteries of early Anglo-Saxon England,⁴⁷ so Repton might well have had copies. Felix later tells us that devils tempted Guthlac to excessive fasting by recalling the 'famous monks of Egypt' (*VG* XXX); and though it was the hagiographer who put these words into the devils' mouths, there would have been little point in his doing so unless the Egyptians had been familiar to his audience and potentially to Guthlac himself.⁴⁸

Some of the earliest Irish missionaries such as Aidan (*HE* III.16) and Fursey (*HE* III.19) — and Englishmen trained in Irish tradition — had the habit of retiring to isolated places for refreshment in the middle and/or at the end of their missionary endeavours. Felix may not have known Aidan's story (since he did not know Bede's *History*), but he used the *Life of Fursey*;⁴⁹ whether Guthlac himself could have read about either is debatable. Other early Irish *Saints' Lives* like Adomnan's *Life of Columba* are not primarily concerned with the anchoritic tradition, and those later ones which were concerned with hermits are on the whole much later than Guthlac. It seems to me probable that Guthlac drew his inspiration from the *Lives* of Middle Eastern monks rather than from the Irish, especially considering Felix's emphasis that he had the 'Petrine' tonsure.

Guthlac as the subject of an Anglo-Saxon *Saint's Life* is unique in his single-minded devotion to the anchoritic and ascetic; even Cuthbert, who comes closest to him, did far more 'in the world' than Guthlac (as, indeed, did Sabas and Fursey); but there were other unsung hermits in the landscape. Clayton lists several: those who came hurrying when they heard of

Saint Wilfrid's death; Wilgils, father of St Willibrord at the end of his life; and Hereberht who lived on an island in a lake (*HE* IV.29).⁵⁰ Another anchorite may have lived not far away from Guthlac's hermitage on Crowland at Thorney (see below p 6). Perhaps the impulse towards the ascetic hermit's life was a genuinely Anglo-Saxon response to Christianity.

In his mid twenties, then, Guthlac decided to seek the fens, which he presumably knew about because his family lived in Mid Anglia, at least at the time of his birth, and perhaps also because of Repton's connection with *Medeshamstede*. Felix describes the area in an often quoted passage:

There is in the midland district of Britain a most dismal fen of immense size, which begins at the banks of the river Granta not far from ... Cambridge, and stretches from the south as far north as the sea. It ... now consist[s] of marshes, now of bogs, sometimes of black waters overhung by fog, sometimes studded with wooded islands and traversed by the windings of tortuous streams. So ... Guthlac ... he made his way thither ... by the most direct route (*VG* XXIV).

For Guthlac the watery fen was the equivalent to the dry desert for Antony and Sabas, both were 'places on the extreme fringes of society',⁵¹ presumably because they were not inhabited by settled agriculturalists. Though it is now recognised that there had been a considerable Romano-British fenland population, the early Anglo-Saxon period seems to have been much less populous, and occupation was probably not continuous. The precise reason for this gap is somewhat doubtful, but may have been due to the deterioration of the climate and of the Roman drainage system.⁵² Early Anglo-Saxons certainly lived on the fen margins, however, and exploited it by fishing, fowling and the like.

Colgrave pointed out that the Beowulfian monster Grendel was 'a prowler in the borderland, who kept to the marshes, the fens and the fastnesses' ('*mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold, fen ond festen*', *Beowulf* lines 103–4).⁵³ Moreover, the *Cotton Gnomonic Poem* (*Maxims II*, lines 18–19, 42–3) apparently regards it as similarly normal that a *þyrs* ('thyr's', a monster like Grendel) should dwell alone in the fen, as that a wolf should live in a grove.⁵⁴ Both these poems are known only in manuscripts dating from the later 10th century at earliest, so that they may not provide evidence for the situation three hundred years before. However, though Felix may have exaggerated for effect, there is no reason to disbelieve that for the Anglo-Saxons of about the year 700 the fen landscape was sparsely populated and probably uncanny. It therefore neatly fulfilled the hermit's desire for the desert: a wild place where he might commune with God, but which was the domain of evil spirits, which the saint had to be strong enough to expel.⁵⁵

The choice of habitat

Guthlac, Felix said, with the consent of the elders, 'made his way to the fens by the most direct route' (*VG* XXIV). Colgrave assumed that he went along the Roman road to Cambridge,⁵⁶ and from there by boat;

but a look at the map shows that this is hardly the most direct route; Cambridge is too far to the south. The most obvious place for him to have aimed for would have been *Medeshamstede*, which surely must have been known about at Repton, even if it were not its mother-house. As already mentioned, a man called Tatwine told Guthlac about Crowland, with its 'unknown portents and terrors of various shapes'.

Guthlac ... on hearing this, earnestly besought his informant to show him the place. Tatwine accordingly ... taking a fisherman's skiff [*piscatoria scifula*], made his way ... through trackless bogs ... till he came to the said spot; it is called Crowland, an island in the middle of the marsh, ... Guthlac loved the remoteness of the spot, ... and vowed with righteous purpose to spend all the days of his life there (VG XXV).

Crowland was, in fact, a peninsula, since it was joined 'to the fen margins at Peakirk, just over 4 miles to the west, by a narrow ridge of gravel'. On the east, however, the peninsula was slightly higher and wider, and was no doubt more easily reached by boat than overland, so that it came to be regarded as an island.⁵⁷ The whole landscape has been altered in modern times by new man-made channels, drainage, agriculture and urban development, but the river Welland, which used to run along the northern edge of the original 'island', would have provided the main access for Guthlac's visits and visitors.⁵⁸

There seem to be some disjunctions in the following chapters. In VG ch.XXV it might appear that Guthlac first arrived on Crowland on the 25th of August, the Feast of St Bartholomew (to whom Guthlac was devoted) and took up residence immediately. However, in the next chapter, Felix tells us that after only a few days there, Guthlac went back to spend ninety days with his companions (*sodalis suos*), whom he had left without any farewells. Felix does not tell us where he went, but the major purpose for his lengthy visit must surely have been to arrange support and provisions, and Repton was too distant for that, though there would no doubt have been time for a visit there within ninety days. The people he questioned about the fens may well have been clerics, and he may have returned with Tatwine to a local

minster, where some companions from Repton had remained.

From Felix's later miracle stories, it is clear that Guthlac, like Sabas and Cuthbert, was, during his ascetic life, in touch with the monks of a neighbouring establishment, and that many of his visitors may have come from there by small boats, sounding a signal to announce their arrival. In Cuthbert's case, his support came from the offshore island of Lindisfarne, but Felix never tells us where Guthlac's base was. The usual assumption seems to be that it was at Thorney, about 4.5 miles (7.5 kms) to the southeast of Crowland, but there does not appear to be any evidence, either historical or archaeological or in place names, that in the 8th century there was anything more than another anchorite at Thorney. It was earlier known as *Ancarig*, 'the anchorite's island';⁵⁹ the foundation of the abbey was much later. There may have been a double monastery at Castor, about 10 miles to the south-southwest of Crowland.⁶⁰ It seems more probable, however, that Guthlac's connections were with *Medeshamstede* itself (now Peterborough, nearly 8 miles to the south), which must have been founded in the mid 7th century, and which seems quickly to have become rich, with widespread colonies and influence.⁶¹ For what it is worth, the boundaries of the spurious foundation charter of *Medeshamstede* include the territories later separately assigned to the abbeys of Crowland and Thorney.⁶² Both Castor and *Medeshamstede* would have been easily reachable from Crowland by boat.

At the beginning of ch. XXVII Guthlac at last finished his journey, arriving on Crowland with two boys on the 25th August. It sounds very much as if there is repetition here; that ch. XXVI is perhaps a later insertion, and Guthlac's first exploratory visit to Crowland was three months earlier, at the beginning of summer. For the rest of ch. XXVII the floridity of Felix's style becomes almost impenetrable, emphasising that Guthlac has now become a 'soldier of God', and then Felix takes up the narrative again, citing the two witnesses, Wilfrid and Cissa, mentioned in his prologue:

Now there was in the said island a mound built of clods of earth which greedy comers to the waste had dug open, in the hope of finding treasure there; in the side of this there seemed to be a sort of cistern, and in this Guthlac ... began to dwell, after building a hut over it (VG XXVIII).

This must surely have been understood to be a burial mound. Some Anglo-Saxon charter bounds mention 'the barrow which was dug into', and 'the broken barrow',⁶³ so perhaps the tradition that mounds contained treasure, and the practice of digging into them, began quite early in Anglo-Saxon England. Along the axis of the Crowland gravel peninsula barrows of the Bronze Age are known, which have yielded 'rude pottery ... cinerary urns (including Roman ware), ... flint spearheads' and the like⁶⁴ — hardly enough, however, to have tempted treasure seekers.

In fact, unless a mound had been used as a convenient repository for a coin hoard,⁶⁵ in England it is

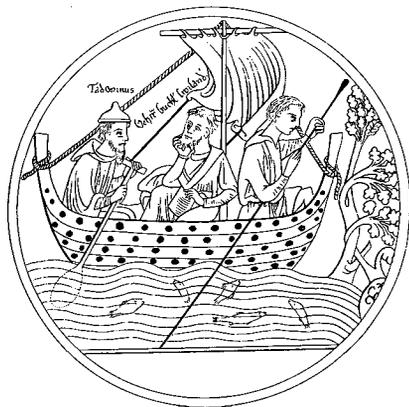


Figure 5. Guthlac goes by boat to Crowland.
(Drawing after the late 12th century Guthlac Roll)

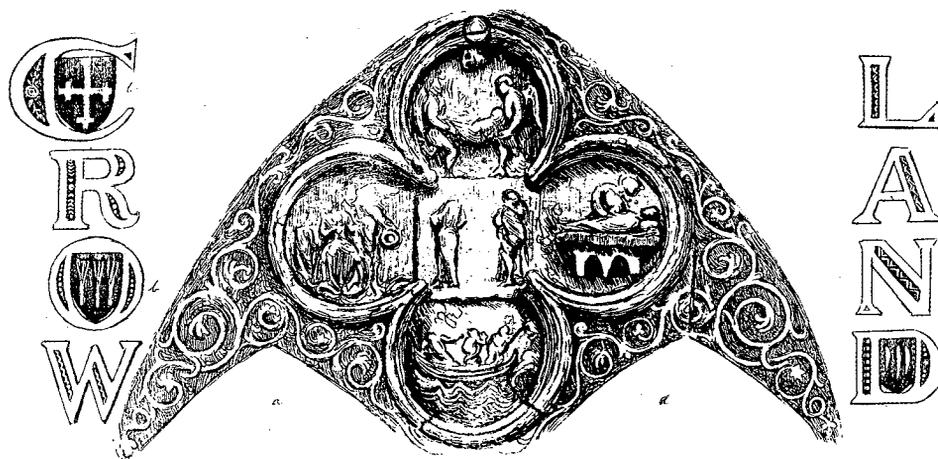


Figure 6. Sculptures in a 13th century quatrefoil at Crowland Abbey record episodes in Guthlac's Life. Top: devils starting to carry Guthlac to Hell; right; Guthlac drives out an evil spirit; bottom; Guthlac arrives at Crowland by boat; left; Guthlac in his oratory. From a drawing made in the 19th century.

only the richer barrows of the later 6th and 7th centuries — about a hundred years before Guthlac's arrival in Crowland — which would have yielded enough in the way of precious metals to make the efforts of grave-robbers (as opposed to archaeologists) worthwhile. But it is doubtful whether there ever was one of these Anglo-Saxon barrows on the 'island', or if the mound-robbers would have been able to make a distinction between one kind of round burial mound and another. At Eye, about 5 miles (7.5km) to the south of Crowland, and on a comparable gravel peninsula, a 'Saxon burial with grave goods of beads datable to the mid-6th century AD' was found in 1984, secondary in a Bronze Age barrow,⁶⁶ so that a similar but richer burial at Crowland is possible.

It is difficult to know what is meant by 'a sort of cistern', as no stone is found in the area. There have been excavated locally Neolithic long barrows with timber-lined chambers,⁶⁷ but these would have collapsed, and it seems unlikely that grave-robbers (as opposed to modern archaeologists) could have recognised and dug out such a chamber. Colgrave (writing before the discovery of the Bronze Age barrows on Crowland) conjectured that Guthlac's mound might have been a Roman barrow, examples of which are known from eastern England. Some of these contained cists 'built of tiles, mortar, stone, or iron-bolted wooden planks',⁶⁸ but it is not clear that they would have been big enough to serve as a hut base.

In Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit* (which Felix used elsewhere), an anchorite is mentioned as living in an 'old cistern' [*in cisterna veteri*];⁶⁹ and in Aldhelm's *Prose De Virginitate* (which Felix also used elsewhere), Athanasius (author of the *Life of Antony*) is said to have hidden 'in the dry hollow of a cistern' for six years.⁷⁰ Perhaps, then, Felix borrowed the term and used it imprecisely, and Guthlac's 'cistern' may have been no more than a robber pit dug into the gravel which provided him with a conveniently scooped-out base for a 'Sunken Featured Building' of a typically Anglo-Saxon type. Later details in one of Guthlac's visions (VG ch.XXXI) where devils were envisaged as

entering his cell

through floorholes and gaps; neither the hinges of the doors nor the openings in the wattle-work denied them entry

might well indicate that Guthlac's cell was very similar to the houses lovingly reconstructed with plank floors over a hollow, but with log walls instead of wattle and daub, not far away at West Stow in Suffolk.⁷¹

There have been attempts to discover the site of Guthlac's cell, and there is still a metal sign on the south of the abbey church announcing its site, which marks where later tradition placed it, and where the rector thought he had found it in 1908. Stocker has argued that Guthlac's cell with its oratory is unlikely to have been what Hædda dedicated as a church, or Guthlac would not have had to get up from his death-bed to hear mass. Moreover, Stocker regards the fact that the saint's bones were translated from his oratory into a gorgeous shrine a year after his death as best interpreted as 'the removal of the saint's relics from the inconvenient [but nearby] outer building into the main church'.⁷²

Another possibility is that Guthlac's cell was sited about 500m to the northeast of the present abbey church, on a site known as Anchor Hill (or Anchorage, or Anchor Church Hill) where a later medieval 'chapel' apparently overlay a Bronze Age barrow and was surrounded by an enclosure ditch, as can be seen on air photographs.⁷³ Guthlac's establishment evidently had several cells, however, and it could have been one of the others that was originally on Anchor Hill.⁷⁴ This is near the place where a stone has recently (April 1999) been placed, as was shown on local television where it was stated that this was the site of Guthlac's cell; the inscription on the stone is much more circumspect.

The early Anglo-Saxons avoided living on or near prehistoric burial mounds, though they dug graves into them for their own dead, but a barrow (or indeed a deserted Roman site) was an appropriate place for a hermit saint to take up residence. As already mentioned, when Antony first moved away from his

village, he withdrew to some tombs, and later to a deserted fort on a mountain, each time shutting himself in (VA 8–13). Sabas moved several times from one hermitage to another, but at Castellion (already mentioned) he used a deserted Roman fort, and when he and his fellow monks started to clear it, they found beneath the debris

a large, vaulted, inhabitable room made of wonderful stones; after digging it out and setting it in order, he made it into a church (VS 27).

If Guthlac was indeed attempting to emulate the desert fathers, therefore, he would have regarded a burial mound as appropriate place for his hermitage. Unfortunately, then, Felix's account of Guthlac's siting of his hut, and the discovery of structures within it, is so hagiographically conventional, that it is doubtful if it can be regarded as historically truthful evidence.

There were no ancient remains, nor a convenient hollow, nor even any trees, for Cuthbert on Farne: digging down ... through very hard and stony rock, he made a space to dwell in. He also built a marvelous wall ... above it by placing together and compacting with earth, stones of ... great size; ... therein he made some little dwelling-places from which he could see nothing except the heavens above (AVC III.i).

However, he did get some miraculous help in moving a large stone and a twelve-foot log into exactly the right position for his building works (AVC III.ii,iv).

Asceticism

Felix next recounts details of Guthlac's ascetic life on Crowland:

He [wore] garments made of skins [and] ate no food of any kind except that after sunset he took a scrap of barley bread and a small cup of muddy water (VG XXVIII).

Felix omits any mention of how Guthlac obtained his food; if he had grown it himself, a point would probably have been made of it; presumably the loaves (or the raw materials at least) were brought from the unnamed supporting monastery. Since muddy water would have been easily found, Guthlac did not need one other miracle which the other three saints did: the provision of a spring.

Antony had gone further in asceticism; he ate but once a day after sunset; indeed sometimes only every other day, and frequently only every fourth day did he partake of food. His food was bread and salt; his drink, water only (VA 7).

Only later does Athanasius recount that Antony's clothing had hair on the inside and skin on the outside. He never bathed his body or even washed his feet (VA 47). When Sabas became a solitary for five days a week, he took no food with him (VS 10). What he ate is only mentioned incidentally; for example, when he met four hungry 'Saracens' (Bedouin) and gave them the contents of 'his sheepskin bag, which contained nothing but roots of *melagria* and hearts of reeds'. They took pity on him, and later brought him loaves, cheeses and dates (VS 13 see also 15). Sabas' clothing is also only mentioned incidentally, when he

was refused entry to the imperial palace because he was in 'dirty and much-patched rags', like a beggar (VS 51). On Farne Cuthbert at first dug the land to provide himself with food (AVC III.v), as Antony did later in life at Mount Colzin (VA 50). After two years, however, Cuthbert shut himself in, and so must have been supplied with food from Lindisfarne, though it is not stated. His clothing is not described, though Bede wrote that Cuthbert did not take off his skin boots from one ritual foot-washing at Easter to the next (BVC, 18).

Guthlac's first temptations

Guthlac's first temptation was to ascetic excess:

Now on a certain day while he was meditating ... two devils ... sp[oke] to him in friendly confidence: 'We have ... tested the power of your faith. ... Therefore ... we will instruct you in the lives of ... those famous monks who inhabited Egypt [who] destroyed the vices of human weakness with the sword of abstinence. ... So let not your fast be a matter of two or three days, ... but a fast of seven days. ... Guthlac ... rose up and sang: 'Let mine enemies be turned back', etc. When the impostor his foe heard this, he vanished like smoke. ... But the saint ... began even then to eat his daily food, taking a scrap of barley bread (VG XXX).

As before, Felix emphasizes Guthlac's moderation and, indeed, his common sense.

Guthlac's next temptation was of despair:

Guthlac was engaged one day upon his usual task of singing psalms and hymns, while the ancient foe ... shot ... a poisoned arrow of despair. ... For when he remembered that the sins he had committed in the past were of immense weight, it seemed to him that he could not be cleansed from them ... But on the third day at nightfall ... he began to sing ... 'In my distress I called upon the Lord', etc. And lo! The blessed Bartholomew ... presented himself, ... promising he would come to his aid. ... From that time never indeed did the devil seize the weapon of despair to use against him (VG XXIX).

In these two incidents the devils seem to be merely a device, a way of expressing what we would consider, in the circumstances, a psychologically normal temptation to excess (holy anorexia?), and an understandable period of depression. These incidents are not paralleled in Antony's visions, but he warned against the devil's temptation to despondency in the long sermon which he preached to his monks (VA 16).⁷⁵

Guthlac's further encounters with devils

Guthlac's other visions were of devils as monsters, first as misshapen humans:

When Guthlac ... was once keeping vigil at the dead of night, ... he suddenly saw the whole tiny cell filled with horrible troops of foul spirits; ... they covered the whole space beneath the heavens. ... For they were ferocious in appearance, terrible in shape with great heads, long necks, thin faces, yellow complexions, filthy beards, shaggy ears, wild foreheads,

fierce eyes, foul mouths, horses' teeth, throats vomiting flames, twisted jaws, thick lips, strident voices, singed hair, fat cheeks, pigeon breasts, scabby thighs, knotty knees, crooked legs, swollen ankles, splay feet, spreading mouths, raucous cries. ... They bound the limbs of the said man of God and took him out of the cell; and ... plunged him into the muddy waters of the black marsh. Then they ... dragged him through the dense thickets of brambles, tearing all his limbs and his body. ... [Then] they ... command[ed] him to depart from the desert. He, however, answered ... 'The Lord is at my right hand, lest I should be moved'. ... They took whips like iron and began to beat him.

Some readers have believed that these monsters represent the saint's biased view of the local inhabitants, but though some of them around the year 700 may have been 'outlaws, bandits, and half-savage fishers and wildfowlers', traditionally leading a 'semi-nomadic amphibious life, rowing or wading from one patch of dry land to another', and modern folklore attributes webbed feet to the fenman,⁷⁶ Felix's exceedingly exaggerated description is clearly of frightening devils, which may have taken the form of familiar bogey men like the *þyrs* of Old English poetry.

The demons then took Guthlac

through ... the freezing skies to the sound of the horrible beating of their wings. Now ... there could be seen coming ... innumerable squadrons of foul spirits ... [and] they ... with immense uproar ... carried ... Guthlac to the accursed jaws of hell. When he beheld the smoking caverns of the glowing infernal region, he forgot all the torments which he had patiently endured before. ... For ... the sulphurous eddies of flame mixed with icy hail seemed almost to touch the stars with drops of spray; and evil spirits running about tortured the souls of the wicked. ... The crowds of attendant demons ... cried out and said: 'Lo, the power has been granted to us to thrust you into these pains'. But the man of God ... answered them: 'Woe unto you, sons of darkness, seed of Cain, you are but dust and ashes' (VG XXXI).

The devils are not described as having wings, but



Figure 7. Guthlac attacked by humanoid devils (Drawing after the late 12th century Guthlac Roll)

when they need them, they have them. In *Beowulf* (line 107), Grendel is also called Cain's descendant.⁷⁷

Guthlac was rescued by his patron St Bartholomew, who commanded the devils to take Guthlac back to his own dwelling.

Straightway ... they carried him back with the utmost gentleness. ... So when dawn was at hand [Guthlac] stood giving thanks to Christ in the very spot from which he had been carried off. Afterwards ... he saw ... two of the attendant spirits ... weeping: when he asked why they wept they answered: 'We mourn for our strength which has been everywhere broken by you'. ... Then they vanished like smoke (VG XXXIII).



Figure 8. St Bartholomew commands the devils to return Guthlac to his dwelling. (Drawing after the late 12th century Guthlac Roll). Note that Bartholomew is handing Guthlac a scourge: a later addition to the legend.

Later, Guthlac had a similar terrifying vision, this time involving illusory animals, which he dispelled without St Bartholomew's help:

When [Guthlac] ... was spending a certain night in assiduous prayer, ... he thought that the whole island ... trembled all around with a tremendous clamour. Then ... suddenly he heard the noise as of a herd of beasts rushing together. ... Straightway he saw ... various monsters bursting into his house from all sides. Thus a roaring lion fiercely threatened to tear him with its bloody teeth: then a bellowing bull dug up the earth with its hoofs and drove its gory horn into the ground; or a bear, gnashing its teeth, ... threatened him with blows; a serpent, too, rearing its scaly neck, disclosed the threat of its black poison: to conclude briefly — the grunting of the boar, the howling of the wolf, the whinnying of the horse, the belling of the stag, the hissing of the serpent, the lowing of the ox, the croaking of the raven, made harsh and horrible noises. ... And so the holy servant of Christ, arming his breast with the sign of salvation ... uttered these words: 'O most wretched Satan, your strength is made manifest; for now do you not imitate the whinnying, the grunting and the croaking of miserable beasts, you who once attempted to liken yourself to the eternal God? Therefore I command you ... to desist from this tumult'.

Forthwith, ... the whole apparition vanished into the empty air (VG XXXVI)

Similar visions in the earlier lives

Antony's first temptation (VA 5) was sexual, and has no parallel in the later *Lives*. The second demonic attack on him was such a painful physical beating that the friend who brought bread to the tombs for him found him next day unconscious and carried him to the village church. When he recovered, Antony insisted on being taken back to the tombs (VA 8). But his third encounter obviously provides one of the sources for Guthlac's two more exaggerated visions:

It was as though demons were breaking through the four walls of the little chamber. ... All at once the place was filled with the phantoms of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, and of serpents, asps, and scorpions, and of wolves. ... The lion roared, ready to spring upon him, the bull appeared about to gore him through, the wolf was rushing straight at him; and the noises emitted simultaneously by all the apparitions were frightful (VA 9).

The Lord himself came to help Antony, though the apparition with a heavenly light descending is similar to that in Guthlac's *Life*.

Sabas' encounters with demons seem at first rather casual; after he had withdrawn to the eastern desert:

On one occasion, when in the middle of the night he was lying on the sand, the devil tried to terrify him by taking the form of snakes and scorpions. But ... he, ... making the sign of the cross. ... exclaim[ed] ... 'The Lord God ... gives you power over you with the words 'Behold, I have given you authority to tread underfoot snakes and scorpions'. ... As he said these words, the poisonous beasts vanished instantly. On another occasion, Satan appeared to him in the likeness of a most terrifying lion.

Sabas defeated him with similar words;

and from then on God made every poisonous and carnivorous beast subject to him, and he received no hurt from living with them in the desert (VS 12).

But when Sabas went to Castellion, his encounters



Figure 9. Guthlac's house is invaded by zoomorphic devils (Drawing after the late 12th century Guthlac Roll).

more closely resemble those of Antony and Guthlac:

When he was keeping vigil one night and begging God to cleanse the place from the impure spirits that lurked there, suddenly the demons began to make a beating sound and to display apparitions in the likeness sometimes of snakes and wild animals and sometimes of crows. ... Since they were thwarted by his persistent prayer, they departed from the place, shouting ... 'The gorge you colonised does not satisfy you, but you force your way into our place as well. See, we withdraw from our own territory. We cannot resist you, since you have God as your defender.' With these and similar words, they withdrew from the mountain ... with a certain beating sound and confused tumult, like a flock of crows (VS 27).

The idea that the hermit saint is invading territory rightly belonging to the demons is also found in the *Life of Antony*; when he was occupying the deserted fort on the Outer Mountain (from which he had had to drive away natural 'creeping things'):

His acquaintances who came to see him often spent days and nights outside. ... They heard what sounded like riotous crowds inside ... shrieking; 'Get out of our domain! What business have you in the desert? You cannot hold out against our persecution' (VA 13)

All these events refer back to Christ's encounters with the devil in the wilderness.

Other corresponding passages in the *Life of Antony* are also much briefer than those in Guthlac's *Life*. When he was living on the Inner Mountain,

We have learned how many wrestlings he endured ... in conflict with demons. For there, too, [visitors] heard tumults and many voices and clangor as of weapons. At night they saw the mountain alive with wild beasts. They also saw him fighting as with visible foes, and praying against them (VA 51).

On another occasion

When he was about to eat and stood up to pray, about the ninth hour, he felt himself carried off in spirit, and — strange to say — ... as it were, outside himself, and as though guided aloft by certain beings. Then he also saw loathsome and terrible beings ... bent on preventing him from passing through. ... Antony's guides intervened. ... Then as they brought accusations but could not prove them, the way opened to him ... unhindered; and presently he saw himself approaching, so it seemed to him, and halting with himself; and so he was the real Antony again (VA 65)

Soon after, he was called from on high in the middle of the night, and

looking up, saw a towering figure, unsightly and frightening, standing and reaching to the clouds; further, certain beings ascending as though on wings. The former was stretching out his hands: some of the latter were stopped by him, while others flew over him and ... rose without further trouble. At such as these the monster gnashed his teeth, but exulted over those who fell. Forthwith a voice addressed itself to Antony, 'Understand the vision!' He ... realized that it was the passing of souls (VA 66)



Figure 10. A version of *The Temptation of St Antony* by Hieronymus Bosch.

Though Cuthbert had a vision of the passing of St Aidan to heaven, his encounters with devils, as before remarked, are perfunctory, and those with angels are much more down to earth and practical, as when they gave him advice, or provided food.

The accounts of the attacks on the saints combine learned traditions with a popular element, and it seems very reasonable that Guthlac himself might interpret his hallucinations in the light of what he had read about Antony's (and perhaps other saints') battles with demons. In addition, the work of the hagiographer is suspect: once he had read in earlier *Lives* of such visions, he would take care to provide his own hero with the same, if not better. Nevertheless, though Felix certainly described Guthlac's visions in the hagiographic tradition of demonic attacks, this does not mean that they were purely fictional.

Partly overlapping with the visions of demonic attacks are those concerning journeys to the otherworld, which have been examined and discussed by Jacques Le Goff. He considers that the medieval visions of Heaven and Hell combine traditions from Judeo-Christian apocalypsis, and from oral Celtic pagan accounts of visits to the underworld. He lists twelve, ranging in date from the later 7th century to the early 14th, and from at least six different European countries, and includes two from Anglo-Saxon England, both from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (one by Drihtelm (*HE* V.12), the other by the Irishman Fursey (*HE*.III.19), however).⁷⁸ Le Goff does not include two from the correspondence of Boniface: one, set out in a letter of 716 (no.10), would probably now be called a 'Near Death' experience of a monk of Wenlock during the reign (709–716) of Ceolred of Mercia, who was described as guilty of horrible crimes. The other (no.115),

describes a similar vision which took place after the death of Æthelbald, who was being punished in Hell.⁷⁹ The details of the strife between devils and saints in the *Saints' Lives* discussed here have some of the features of the 'journeys to the otherworld', in particular in the sighting of Hell in the second part of Guthlac's first vision, where 'awful torments [are] inflicted by monstrous beasts and loathsome demons upon the dead'.

Modern explanations for the visions

H E Hallam suggested that Guthlac's

distress resembles closely the symptoms of malaria or fen ague. The sufferer sees strange shapes floating before him, he chokes like one immersed in mud, he feels like one drawn through thorn-bushes, he alternately roasts in hell and freezes in the middle air, and the onset and departure of his malady are as sudden as those of Guthlac's torments.⁸⁰

Certainly the alternate chill and heat of malaria recall a medieval idea of hell (as I have personally experienced), but Antony and Sabas, whose visions came first, in the dry desert, could not have been suffering from this illness.

M L Cameron has examined the accounts of both Antony's and Guthlac's visions of devils, and concluded that they were in both instances 'convulsive and hallucinatory episodes induced by the eating of bread made from grain infected with the fungus *Claviceps* (ergot)'. Cameron remarks on the similarity of both saints' hallucinations to the symptoms of poisoning by LSD,

a derivative of the lysergic acid that is the main hallucinogenic component of ergot. ... There are two main centres of attack on the nervous system:

autonomic and central. On the autonomic system its effects [include] chills, sweating, nausea, headache [and] dry mouth. Its effects on the central system are of four kinds. In one kind ... perception is distorted, so that colours, sounds, tastes, and tactile stimuli become confused and accentuated. ... In another, ... there are disorders of thought. The subject ... evaluates himself ... often ... [with] panic and fright. In a third kind, ... the subject explores his true self, appreciates a oneness with universal concepts. The fourth kind ... takes a form similar to that of a religious conversion, a sudden awareness ... of being saved, of a unity with God and the universe. ... The heightened awareness and distortion of perception are expressed in the form of visionary experiences.

Cameron comments that the visions of both Antony and Guthlac 'followed the eating of their daily meal of bread and water. To live on bread and water alone one would have to consume up to two pounds of bread a day', and for Antony and Guthlac this was at a single sitting. Felix clearly stated that Guthlac ate barley bread, and Antony would certainly also have chosen the same. The fact that they did not drink the usual beer or ale would have meant they were both deficient in Vitamin A, and this would have exacerbated the effects of the ergot. Cameron remarks particularly on the bright light and comfort which the saints experienced at the end of their frightening visions. The pain and wounds which both suffered — from which they made quick recovery — could have been due to other alkaloids in the ergotized bread causing convulsions.⁸¹

The similarities between the saints' hallucinations and the symptoms of LSD poisoning are certainly striking, but there are considerable problems in accepting Cameron's persuasive arguments wholeheartedly. Some problems he raises himself: first, why were the saints' companions not affected? Probably because they were not leading such ascetic lives as the saints were, he suggests. However, such visions are standard in the *Lives* of ascetic saints;⁸² could they have all been suffering from ergotism? It is not impossible, but there is no need to assume so much. I have already noted that Sabas' and especially Cuthbert's visions were not as horrific as Antony's and Guthlac's.

There are some similarities between these saintly visions and the initiatory dreams of shamans;⁸³ and this illustrates the universality of symbols underlying the thinking of humankind in general. In other religions, too, for example in Buddhism,⁸⁴ similar visions appear to be a necessary concomitant of asceticism, which is usually accompanied by long hours of prayer or meditation. Malnutrition and lack of sleep, with resulting susceptibility to illnesses and fevers, may well in themselves be enough to bring forth the visions which the culture expects.

Cameron also noted

that the form and interpretation of ergot-inspired hallucinatory episodes are strongly influenced by the previous experiences and beliefs of the victims.

Yet this surely applies to visionary experiences of any kind. Nor is it only ascetics who experience similar hallucinations: when I had the measles at the age of

five, I was frightened by a frieze of gnome-like men running around the picture-rail in my bedroom, all pointing and shouting at me. There are, indeed, some striking similarities to the saintly visions in the delusions of William Minor, the homicidal lunatic who was one of James Murray's most useful volunteers on the Oxford English Dictionary. He claimed that little boys, fiends, or pygmies crept about in the daytime in the spaces between the floors and ceilings; and that they came into his room through the ceiling, door and windows and beat and tortured him. He was trundled across the countryside in a waggon; and after planes were invented he was put into a flying machine and taken to brothels in Constantinople. He also claimed that his eyes were regularly pecked out by birds.

He was diagnosed as suffering from 'Dementia praecox of paranoid form' — that is, schizophrenia. Minor's biographer, however, conjectured that he might also have been affected by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (first identified *en masse* in the Gulf War, but evidently the same as the 'shell-shock' of the First World War), as a result of the appalling conditions which he encountered as a surgeon during the American Civil War. The symptoms of the disorder normally diminish after a while, but Minor seems to have suffered from them for a lifetime.⁸⁵ I enquired of a psychiatrist whether Guthlac could have been suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and she said that it would not have produced such visions unaided. Nevertheless, it seems possible that in the earlier years at Crowland Guthlac might have still been suffering the after-effects of the horrors of warfare he had engaged in as a young man, as well as from the immediate effects of his asceticism.

Britons in the fens?

Guthlac had another vision of a different character:

In the days of Coenred King of the Mercians, while the Britons ... were troubling the English with ... their devastations of the people, on a certain night about cockcrow, when Guthlac ... was as usual engaged in vigils and prayers, that he was suddenly overcome by a dream-filled sleep, and it seemed to him that he heard the shouts of a tumultuous crowd. Then ... he was aroused ... and went out of the cell; ... standing, with ears alert, he recognised the words the crowd were saying, and realised that British hosts were approaching: ... for in years gone by he had been an exile among them, so that he was able to understand their sibilant speech. Straightway they strove to approach his dwelling through the marshes, and ... he saw all his buildings burning: ... indeed they caught him too and began to lift him into the air on the sharp points of their spears. Then at length the man of God, perceiving the thousand-fold forms of this insidious foe ... sang the first verse of the sixty-seventh psalm, ... 'Let God arise', etc: when they had heard this ... all the hosts of demons vanished like smoke (VG XXXIV).

There has been much discussion over this passage, which is usually regarded by scholars as similar to the earlier demonic visions, but often informally cited as

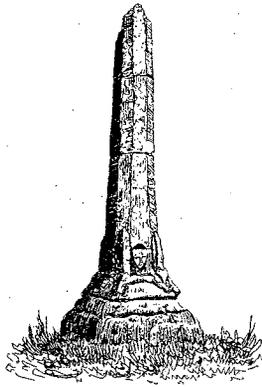


Figure 11. St Guthlac's cross, Crowland. From a drawing made in the 19th century.

evidence that a population of Britons survived in the fens until the early 8th century. However, Felix's description of Guthlac's nightmare is unusually specific, and its origins clearly lay in the fact that there was a British incursion into Mercia during the reign of Cœnred (705–709); none of the other visions are dated so precisely. Though other documentary evidence is lacking, such raids were doubtless formidable in the half-century before the construction of Offa's Dyke.⁶⁶ If we understand the chapter literally, Guthlac was in his dream thrown back into a situation of his earlier life, and imagined a tormenting British army around him. As he came fully awake, he would have realised the improbability that it should have penetrated so far east (and perhaps that Britons would toss him into the air on spearpoints), and so tried the usual method of dispelling demons.

Felix therefore gives no support to the theory that Britons continued to speak their own language in the district so late. Place-names of British origin in this area are negligible, and there was probably a short period of abandonment between the late Romans and the early Mid Anglians (see above, p.5).⁶⁷ No similar vision is found in Antony's *Life* (or any other saint's *Life*, so far as I know) so that the chapter could well be based on a real event. If the vision were genuine, and reported to Felix at second hand by Guthlac's devoted followers, it may have been sparked off by a loud noise (thunder? bird calls?). Once, as an adult, I awoke in the middle of the night terrified, because a noise made me think a dog-fight between British and German planes was taking place over my head, as had often happened when I was a child. There was an appreciable interval before I realised that the war was long over, and the noise was merely rumbling thunder. Something similar may have happened to Guthlac, and been faithfully reported. The hagiographer's input here may have been minimal, apart perhaps from the illusory fire 'which occur[s] in numerous English, Irish and continental *Lives*.'⁶⁸

Healing miracles

Benedicta Ward has categorized the 'Miracles of the Desert' as of four kinds: miraculous Dreams and Visions (as already discussed); Nature miracles, and

miracles of Clairvoyance, and of Healing,⁶⁹ all of which Felix included.

Guthlac's healing miracles have ritual elements lacking in the earlier *Lives*.⁹⁰ In East Anglia a youth called Hwætred was attacked by an evil spirit and became a danger to himself and others for four years, until his parents brought him to Guthlac, who took him to his oratory, and prayed on his knees for three days, fasting. He then baptised the boy, and, breathing on him, drove out the evil spirit (VG XLI). The wonder-working breath occurs in at least two of Felix's sources.⁹¹ At another time, a *gesith* of Æthelbald's named Ecga, also afflicted by madness, was cured when Guthlac's girdle was placed on him. He wore it always after that and had no more trouble (VG XLII). Guthlac's fame spread and many came to him to be healed. The foot of Ofa, one of Æthelbald's retainers, had become infected by a thorn. Guthlac covered him with the sheepskin he wore when praying, and instantly the thorn flew out of Ofa's foot and he recovered (VG XLV). After Guthlac's death, his sister Pega cured a man from the province of Wissa by dripping into his eyes some salt previously blessed by Guthlac dissolved in water (VG LIII). Nearly all these miracles look like cures which could have really happened; it is merely the interpretation of them as miracles which we doubt.

Miracles of a similar kind were common for all our anchorites. Cuthbert, both present and absent, cured the insane and diseased by his prayers (AVC I.vii, II.viii, III.i, IV.iii, IV.iv, IV.v, IV.vi, VII). Most of Guthlac's healing miracles appear to be inspired by some in Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, which Felix certainly knew; for example the story of the paralysed boy, cured by Cuthbert's shoes (BVC 45; cf. AVC IV.5), and of the Abbess Ælflæd and one of her nuns who were cured of physical illness by Cuthbert's girdle (BVC 23). Guthlac's post-mortem miracle, however, may have been adapted from Adomnan's *Life of Columba* (II.7)⁹² where a piece of salt blessed by the saint was used for some days to cure eye-infections.

Antony drove out a large number of demons: for example, from two little girls, one at a distance (VA



Figure 12. Guthlac's heals Hwætred by driving out the evil spirit. (Drawing after the late 12th century Guthlac Roll).

48), another by an instantaneous prayer at the gates of Alexandria (VA 71), and from two men, from one instantaneously (VA 63), from another by a night-long prayer, the demon attacking the saint as it went (VA 64). A man with a strange illness was told to return to Egypt, where he recovered (VA 57); and two dreadfully diseased females were cured at long distance (VA 58, 61).

One of Sabas' monks, suffering from heat stroke, was rescued by a cloud when he mentioned Sabas in his prayers (VS 26); and he cured a man, not only from a long illness, but also from the effect of a fall from an animal's back (VS 45). Sabas also imitated two of Christ's miracles by curing a woman with a haemorrhage (VS 62), and a girl possessed by a demon (VS 63). However, he also inflicted illness to punish disobedience (VS 39); the two Anglo-Saxon saints are never recorded as taking revenge in this way.

It is clear that healing miracles attributed to any saint are not to be trusted as belonging to him (or her) alone. Every self-respecting hagiographer knew that he had to prove his subject's sanctity with healing miracles, and if he knew of none, it was fair to adapt some from an earlier *Life*, sometimes making them more remarkable in the process. Of all elements of the *Lives*, then, the healing miracles are the least to be believed as real events in the saint's life, but, provided that the hagiographer comes from a background very similar to that of his subject, they can provide useful evidence for contemporary social conditions.

Nature miracles

Guthlac also showed mastery over birds and animals. Felix told how a corvid (perhaps a jackdaw)⁹³ stole some parchment leaves from a monkish visitor, when he went away to pray. Guthlac told his visitor to follow the bird by boat and he found the document unharmed, balanced on top of some reeds in the middle of a pool (VG XXXVIII).⁹⁴ Two of these local birds had become nuisances by stealing things from the buildings, but Guthlac bore it patiently:

For the grace of his excellent charity abounded to all creatures, so that even the birds of the untamed wilderness and the wandering fishes of the muddy marshes would come flying or swimming swiftly to his call; ... and they were even accustomed to take from his hand such food as the nature of each demanded. ... Even the very water and the air obeyed the true servant of the true God (VG XXXVI-II).

The whole point is in the last sentence. As Eliade pointed out, in numerous traditions friendship with animals represents a return to a paradisaical situation.⁹⁵

On one occasion Wilfrid (one of Felix's informants) left his gloves in the boat in which he had brought Æthelbald to visit. While they were indoors, Guthlac said his jackdaws had taken the gloves, and when they went outside the bird was tearing at one of them. At Guthlac's admonition, the bird flew away, leaving the glove on the roof, and Guthlac had it rescued with a stick. Just then three brethren sounded the signal to land, and one of them showed him the other glove

which he had found (VG XL). Thacker considers that these nature miracles are especially close to some found in the *Vita Columbanae* by Jonas, with a detail from Bede (BVC 20).⁹⁶ On another occasion, when Guthlac was talking with Wilfrid, two swallows entered the house, and, singing, perched on Guthlac. He took a basket and put a straw in it, and the swallows started to build a nest, which Guthlac put under the eaves of his house, where they took up residence, as if accepting his decision about a nesting place. This was repeated every year (VG XXXIX). No good analogue is cited for this story, which may be somewhat garbled (since Felix appears to believe that swallows build their nests from straw), but which may therefore have been a genuine reminiscence of Wilfrid's.

All the other saints discussed showed some (usually benevolent) control over animals. For Antony, it was manifested in preventing dangerous animals from causing harm: for example, reptiles left the deserted fort as he arrived (VA 12); crocodiles allowed him and his companions to cross a canal unharmed (VA 15); and hyaenas encircled him, but fled when challenged (VA 52). Nearly all Sabas' encounters with animals were with lions; while he prayed at night in the desert, one struck his sleeping disciple in the face with its tail; when he woke and fled to his teacher, Sabas admonished him for his carelessness (VS 23). Another lion tried to drag Sabas out of his cave by his clothes; Sabas protested that there was room for them both, but the lion left (VS 33). Cyril also told the story which is usually told of Androcles about Sabas and another lion, and went on with another piece of hagiographic folklore concerning yet another lion and a donkey (VS 49).

Cuthbert's encounters with animals were of a rather different kind and more like Guthlac's: instead of driving away dangerous animals, either he admonished and came to an understanding with those which annoyed him, or he was succoured by them. He was observed once, after praying in the sea, being dried on the shore by 'two little sea animals' (AVC II.iii). On a preaching walk along the river Teviot, he and the boy with him obtained as food a large fish which an eagle had caught; they gave half of it back to the bird (AVC II.v). When he went to Farne, he banished two corvids who were taking nesting material from the roof of a shelter; after three days, one came back and asked pardon, so he allowed them to return, and they brought him some lumps of lard, which were used to grease boots (AVC III.v). Even today, Cuthbert is regarded as the protector of the Farne birds, and eiders nesting there are called 'Cuddy's ducks'. The fundamental difference in attitude towards animals by the Middle Eastern and the Anglo-Saxon saints is no doubt partly due to the difference in fauna between the two environments; however, there were still wolves and other predatory animals about in England at the time.⁹⁷

Miracles of clairvoyance

According to Felix, Guthlac miraculously understood the danger from a disciple (called Beccel) who went

homicidally mad at the time of his three-weekly tonsuring of the saint and purposed to kill him. Guthlac was able to talk him out of his intention, and to prevent a recurrence by promising to help him in future (VG XXXV). This perhaps has some similarities to an event in Sabas' life, when six Bedouin ('Saracens') attacked him and a fellow monk, but the earth swallowed one of them up, and the rest fled (VS 14).

Guthlac could also tell what was happening at a distance, informing a visiting abbot that two of his servants, who were coming by a different route, had stopped to drink at a widow's house (VG XLIII). He also knew when two visitors had hidden flasks of beer by the road, for refreshment on their return journey (VG XLIV). For these miracles, Felix seems to be indebted to the *Life of Benedict* in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great. The brothers of Benedict's monastery did not eat when they went on errands; but when two of them were kept away until late, they obtained a snack at the house of a 'pious woman'. On their return, they asked Benedict's blessing, and he told them what they had eaten (XII, pp.174–7). At another time, a messenger was sent to Benedict with two bottles of wine, but he hid one on the way. Benedict told him not to drink it, but to turn it upside down; when he did, a snake came out (XVIII, 194–5). There may also be some similarities between the story of Beccel and that of the resentful monk who had to stand holding a lamp while Benedict was eating. Benedict told him to make the sign of the cross, and then to sit down (XX, pp.196–7).⁹⁸ If Henderson is right, and Guthlac's was an enforced tonsuring, to keep him 'politically paralysed', and Beccel's envisaged assassination was an attempt to curry favour with 'kings and princes',⁹⁹ Felix's version of the story has completely hidden the motivation.

This kind of 'distance-viewing' is common in hagiography: Antony once saw that a brother had died, a day's journey away, and a second was in dire need of water; he was able to dispatch help in time to save him (VA 59). Ward has shown that these miracles are intended to convey 'a picture of insight and foresight carried by grace to a remarkable degree',¹⁰⁰ particularly in the knowledge of human nature.

Guthlac also had the ability to see the future: Æthelbald often visited him, but when he was being harassed by King Ceolred (whose reign began in 709) he became disheartened. Guthlac prophesied that he would eventually come to rule; and so it turned out (VG XLIX).

Guthlac's ordination

Bishop Headda (whom Colgrave identifies with the man who became bishop of Lichfield in 691 and bishop of Leicester in 709, and who died between 716 and 727¹⁰¹) came to visit Guthlac, evidently with the intention of consecrating a church at Crowland. Among his servants on the journey was a secretary called Wigfrith, who claimed that when he saw Guthlac, he would know if

he was a follower of the divine religion. ... For he [Wigfrith] had lived amongst the Irish, and there had

seen ... pretenders of various religions, whom he found able ... to perform ... miracles, but he knew not by what power. He said that there were others there who were followers of the true religion and abounded in many signs and miracles. ... From his experience of these he promised that he could judge the religion of others (VG XLVI).

The bishop was impressed by Guthlac, and after he had consecrated the church, ordained him. At the celebratory feast Guthlac challenged Wigfrith to say what he thought of him now, and Wigfrith prayed for pardon (VG XLVII). Felix does not state whether this ordination meant that Guthlac accepted some pastoral responsibility for local lay people, but given the place of minsters in the ecclesiastical life of the times, it may well have been so.¹⁰² The healing of Hwætred appears to show him baptising already before his ordination, but we cannot be sure of the sequence of events

It appears to be part of the pattern for these anchoritic and ascetic saints that they do not desire ordination, but often accept it reluctantly. Antony indeed never became a priest. Cyril tells us that Sabas believed the desire to be made a cleric was the origin of the love of power. However, some of his disaffected monks went to Jerusalem and asked for a superior to be appointed, because of Sabas' 'extreme rusticity'. Archbishop Sallustius sent for and ordained him in his fifty-third year (VS 18–19, AD 491); later he was appointed archimandrite of the anchorites. The Anonymous author does not mention Cuthbert's ordination, but describes a conversation with the king's sister Ælflæd, who knew that the king wanted to offer Cuthbert a bishopric, and wanted to know herself if he would accept and how long he would be in the office. Cuthbert said he could not refuse, but after two years he would rest from his labours (AVC III.vi).

Death

Guthlac, like Cuthbert and most saints, was able to predict his own death. Abbess Ecgburh¹⁰³ sent Guthlac a lead coffin and a linen cloth to be buried in (gifts almost identical to those Bede says were sent to Cuthbert (BVC 37)), and a query about who his successor would be. Guthlac said he was still among pagan people, as he was (VG XLVIII). After fifteen years at Crowland, as Guthlac was praying,

a spasm of his inward parts suddenly seized him, and ... he ... prepare[d] himself for the joys of the everlasting kingdom. Now for seven days he was wasted by dire sickness and on the eighth day he reached his end.

Brother Beccel was living with him, and told Felix about Guthlac's end. After the first four days, it was Easter Day, and Guthlac got up, celebrated mass and preached. After seven days, he could not speak, and lay in the corner of his oratory opposite the altar, but when Beccel asked for parting words, Guthlac said:

After my spirit has left this poor body, go to my sister Pega and tell her I have in this life avoided her presence so that in eternity we may see one another in the presence of our Father. ... Tell her also to place my body in the coffin and wrap it in the cloth which

Ecgburh sent me.

Beccel asked him about conversations which Guthlac had had every morning and evening in his cell, and the saint said an angel had been sent to him for consolation. He instructed Beccel to tell this to no one except Pega or 'Ecgerht the anchorite'. Guthlac then breathed a sigh, so that the odour of sweet-smelling flowers seemed to come from his mouth, as it had done for two members of Columbanus' community.¹⁰⁴ Beccel saw the whole building filled with a bright light all night. At dawn Guthlac spoke his last words, received the last rites, and died. His death is dated to April 11th, which was the Wednesday of Easter week in 714,¹⁰⁵ when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* dates Guthlac's death. A light stretched up to heaven, and angelic songs were heard. The account appears to be modelled on Bede's description of Cuthbert's death (BVC 37) with necessary variations.

As recounted in the Anonymous *Life*, Cuthbert predicted his own death more than two years ahead; he also granted the request of a hermit that they should die simultaneously (AVC IV.ix). When he felt his death near because of illness, Cuthbert resigned his bishopric and returned to Farne, 'satisfied with the converse and ministry of angels', but with the help of a brother whom he miraculously cured of dysentery (AVC IV.xi-xii). When he died, he was taken back to Lindisfarne, and buried with dignity in the church (AVC IV.xiii). His body remained incorrupt at the time of his translation eleven years later (AVC IV.xiv).

Antony's death was described much less elaborately, but it was equally foreseen. He was afraid his body might be preserved above ground (like an Egyptian mummy), and so instructed that he should be buried in the earth. He hurried back to the Inner Mountain (where he was looked after by two ascetics), allotted his few possessions to his followers (VA 90-1), died peacefully at the age of about 105, and no one knows where he is buried (VA 92-3). Compared to the other *Lives* we are discussing, Sabas' is immensely long, due not only to the fact that he is said to have lived for 97 years, but also to his many activities and the prolixity of his biographer. His death in AD 532 was foreseen by a few days (VS 76-7). The archbishop sent him back to his own laura, and there he appointed his successor, and remained silent for four days. The next morning he requested communion, and died. Neither Athanasius nor Cyril ascribes an incorrupt body to his saints: perhaps because of the bad reputation mummification had for eastern Christians.¹⁰⁶

When Guthlac died, Beccel left by boat to find Pega, who went the next day to Crowland, finding it smelling sweet. She spent three days 'commending the spirit of her brother to heaven', and then buried him in his oratory (VG L). A year later she wished to move his body to a shrine above ground, and found it incorrupt and his clothing undecayed (VG LI). Bede mentions four saints whose bodies remained incorrupt: Cuthbert and three with East Anglian connections: two daughters of Anna, king of East Anglia; Æthelburg abbess of Farnoutier-en-Brie, and the more famous Æthelthryth of Ely; and Fursey.¹⁰⁷ The

accounts of their translations, and the miraculous discoveries, are all very similar. Felix certainly knew of Cuthbert and Fursey, and it is unlikely that he would not have heard of Æthelthryth and very probably her sister too. It would therefore have been very surprising if Felix had not ascribed this symbol of sanctity to Guthlac. It is possible that their bodies were embalmed at death, and the fact that the embalming was successful was taken as a sign of sanctity. Some Middle Saxon burials have been found which apparently show the effect of such treatment.¹⁰⁸

Post mortem miracles

When Æthelbald heard of Guthlac's death, he came to his tomb and bewailed his friendless state. He spent the night in his usual hut, and had a vision of Guthlac in glory, telling him that he would become king in twelve years' time. Æthelbald asked for a sign, received one; and was still ruling (and presumably still in good repute) when Felix was writing (VG LII). A blind man asked to be taken to Guthlac's body; Pega allowed him into the oratory, took some salt which Guthlac had blessed, scraped it into consecrated water, and dripped it into his eyes. So he regained his sight, and Felix concludes with this triumph for his saint (VG LIII), borrowed as it may be from the *Life of Columba* (see above, p13)

No doubt because of his secret grave, no *post mortem* miracles are reported for Antony, but Sabas performed many over another 23 years until the victory of orthodoxy in 554-5 (VS 90). For example, Sabas was responsible for a burgled silversmith regaining his property (VS 78), cured two harvesters (VS 79), prevented some weavers reneging on an agreement to make curtains for his monasteries (VS 80), rescued a fallen camel bringing supplies to the Great Laura (VS 81), and saved a boy swept down the cliff there by a flood (VS 82). He also saved the laura from destruction by Origenists by overcoming them with mists and darkness (VS 84). This did not finish the attacks or the troubles for the foundation, but eventually orthodoxy won, and peace returned securely to the laura. It is perhaps surprising to us that Cyril records no *post mortem* healing miracles, but focuses on Sabas' care for his foundation, which, indeed, still flourishes today.

Cuthbert's *post mortem* miracles, as related by the Anonymous author, on the contrary, are all medical. A boy afflicted by demons was cured by Cuthbert's (rather unsavoury) relics (AVC IV.xv); a brother from overseas who was taken ill was healed at Cuthbert's tomb (AVC IV.xvi); a paralysed boy was cured by wearing Cuthbert's shoes (AVC IV.xvii). The writer concluded by touching on a few other such miracles without detailing them (AVC IV.xviii). After death, at least, the four saints show their individuality.

Concluding Remarks

Felix's *Life of Guthlac*, therefore, appears to contain several interwoven elements which make it a complex

and fascinating piece of work.

- Some, like the details of his parentage, and his connections with the royal Mercian line, and the general pattern of his life: the nine years from the age of fifteen spent as a gang-leader, his decision to take up the religious life, his two years in the monastery at Repton, the fifteen years as an ascetic hermit at Crowland, and his death in 714, at about the age of forty, are probably literally true, though Felix's *Life* is the only near-contemporary source, either for the person or for the events.

- Some incidents may well have taken place, but have been given a hagiographic slant, either by Guthlac deliberately living his life in accordance with such conventions, or by Felix giving his own version or interpretation of events. The most important event in this category is the choice of a burial mound as a habitation, which I am inclined to accept as true, though it is impossible to verify it, or to decide what kind of a barrow it might have been.

- Some elements belong to standard hagiography: like, for example, the vision of the golden hand seen at the saint's birth, the light illuminating his cell when he died, and some of the miracles and visions ascribed to him, which appear to be adapted from earlier saints' *Lives*.

- Some of the stories in the *Life*, however fictitious the miracles, may tell us a great deal about Guthlac's circumstances: the fact that visitors sounded a signal when they reached the landing stage, for example. They appear to have been mostly clerics and exclusively male, unless one excepts the mad Hwætred's mother, who is not said to have landed on the island.
- One piece of hagiography, the description of the humanoid devils who tortured Guthlac in one of his visions, may have been affected by Anglo-Saxon folklore which placed water-monsters like the Beowulfian Grendel in the fens.

- Felix's description of one of the visions, when Guthlac thought he heard attacking British warriors, may record a genuine 'flash back', caused by the traumas of the primitive warfare Guthlac had engaged in as a youth.

- One of the nature miracles, too, in which Guthlac shows swallows where to nest, may also be a genuine reminiscence of Wilfrid's, slightly distorted in the telling.

I have endeavoured, in this discussion, to sort out the different kinds of trees in the wood, by means of comparison with earlier saints' *Lives*, but I suspect that there may be many as yet undetected hybrids. Perhaps others who penetrate the woodland may be able to identify them more clearly.

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Endnotes

- 1 *Life of Sabas* (hereafter VS); translated by RM Price, with an Introduction and Notes by John Binns, in *Cyril of Scythopolis, Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, Cistercian Studies 114 (Kalamazoo 1991), pp.93-219, ch.27, p.119.

- 2 As translated by B Colgrave in *Felix's Life of Guthlac* (hereafter VG), (Cambridge 1956) chs.24,25, p.89.
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- 5 Most recently examined in a masterly but unfortunately unpublished study (to which I am heavily indebted in this paper) by AT Thacker, *Social and Continental Background to Early Anglo-Saxon Hagiography* (DPhil, Oxford, 1977), pp.279–328; ch VII, 'Felix's Life of Guthlac'. See also Colgrave (1956), pp.16–17 and marginal notes; and WF Bolton, 'The Latin Revisions of Felix's "Vita Sancti Guthlaci"', *Mediaeval Studies* 21 (1959), pp.36–52, at p.37, n.7.
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- 23 Clare Stancliffe conjectures that the lack of reference to Cuthbert's parentage, and the fact that he worked as a shepherd for a lord argues against his belonging to the upper nobility, but his journeying on horse-back (AVC I.6) and arriving at Melrose with horse, spear and servant (Bede's *Prose Life of Cuthbert* (hereafter BVC), 6) is not the behaviour of a peasant, so that he was probably of the lesser nobility ('Cuthbert and the Polarity between Pastor and Solitary', pp.21–42, at p.29, esp n.34, in *St Cuthbert, his Cult and his Community to AD 1200*, ed G Bonner *et al* (Woodbridge 1988).
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- 59 D Hall, *The Fenland Project, Number 2: Fenland Landscapes and Settlement between Peterborough and March*, East Anglian Archaeology Report 35 (1987), p.52.
- 60 The historical evidence is summarised by C G Dallas, 'The Nunnery of St Kyneburgha at Castor', *Durobrivae* 1, 1973, 16–17. Castor is called *Kyneburga caestre* in a 12th-century copy of P Sawyer's charter no.533 (*Anglo-Saxon Charters*, 1968, p.197), from the mid 10th century, and there was a tradition, first recorded unfortunately as late as the 14th century by John of Tynemouth, that Penda's daughter Cyneburh founded a nunnery at Castor near the river Nene. The church is dedicated to St Kyneburgha. Archaeological evidence is equally unreliable. There was a major Roman building (a palace?) at Castor, and there appears to have been some re-use of part of the shell of the building, perhaps within a timber post structure, in the 5th to 7th centuries. After this, there was some evidence of stone-robbing on the site (D Mackreth, 'Castor', *Durobrivae* 9, 1984), pp.22–5; G Lucas, *From Roman Villa to Saxo-Norman Village. An Archaeological Evaluation at the Cedars, Castor*, Cambridge Archaeological Unit Report no.260, May 1998, pp.6–8, 16–17). A small excavation produced evidence of Middle Saxon occupation over the north wing of the Roman building; the small finds were 'unexpectedly rich', and according to one interpretation showed 'that the nuns, many from the upper class of Saxon society, were far from ascetic' (Dallas, 1973). According to another interpretation (Peterborough Museum Sites and Monuments Records no.00646, 01891A) the Middle Saxon occupation gave no sign that it was part of the nunnery. However, in the church is a beautifully carved little figure from the late 8th century, all that remains of an arcaded frieze, which surely can only have originated in a wealthy monastic establishment. Dominic Tweddle compares this figure to other sculptural fragments from Ely, from Fletton near Peterborough and from Peterborough itself, and writes: 'Given its narrow and restricted distribution and the closely related repertoire of forms and decoration, it seems likely that this material represents the sculptural traditions of the great monasteries of Peterborough and Ely and their dependencies. These were clearly sites of great artistic importance of which virtually nothing else is now known.' (In *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600–900*, ed. L Webster and J Backhouse, 1991, p.239.
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- 62 H E Hallam, *Settlement and Society: A Study of the Early Agrarian History of South Lincolnshire* (Cambridge 1965), p.165; see also P H Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London 1968), no.68, p.88.
- 63 A C Amos et al, *Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto 1986–), Fascicule B (Toronto 1991), citations under *beorg*: charter 273.7: *þam beorgum þe adolfen was*; charter 1590.3: *wið eastan brocenan beorg*. Sometimes, though not in Guthlac, barrows were associated with the idea of the

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- 65 LV Grinsell, 'Barrow Treasure, in Fact, Tradition and Legislation', *Folklore* 78 (1967), pp.1–38.
- 66 Hall (1987), p.6.
- 67 I Hodder and P Shand, 'The Haddenham Long Barrow: an Interim Statement', *Antiquity* 62 (1988), pp.349–53. L Shook's argument that a prehistoric chambered barrow is envisaged in the poem *Guthlac A* is not affected by the discussion here; the poet may not have known the landscape as Felix did; see L Shook, 'The Burial Mound in *Guthlac A*', *Modern Philology* 63 (1960), pp.1–10.
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- 70 See Bolton (1959), p.37 n.7; see Aldhelmus *De Virginitate (Prosa)* XXXII, in *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed R Ehwald, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Auct. Antiquis*. XV (Berlin 1919), pp.226–323, at p.274 l.6; translated in *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, M Lapidge and M Herren (Ipswich 1979), pp.59–132, at p.94.
- 71 See cover illustration to S West, *West Stow: The Anglo-Saxon Village I*, East Anglian Archaeology Report 24 (1985).
- 72 Stocker (1993), p.104.
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- 78 See J Le Goff, 'The Learned and Popular Dimensions of Journeys in the Otherworld in the Middle Ages', in SL Kaplan, ed, *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, New Babylon Studies in the Social Sciences 40 (Berlin and New York 1984), pp.19–37, at 22–3.
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- 84 See, for example, V Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow: A Western Woman's Quest for Enlightenment* (London 1998–9), especially p.2 and ch. 10 'Yogini', pp.111–24.
- 85 S Winchester, *The Surgeon of Crowthorne: A Tale of Murder, Madness and the Love of Words* (Harmondsworth Middlesex 1998), pp. 110–111, 140–41, 158, 180–85, (American Title: *The Professor and the Madman*).
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- 89 B Ward, *Introduction to The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. N Russell (London 1980), pp.1–46, at 39–46.
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- 93 Colgrave translates 'jackdaw', on account of the birds' behaviour, and jackdaws are still to be seen in some abundance near Crowland church.
- 94 Thacker (1977, p.309) compares this to two manuscripts written by Columba which remained under water in their book-satchels for a long time, and were found unscathed, but the parallels do not appear close to me. See Anderson (1961; previous note), pp.342–5.
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- 96 Thacker (1977), p.310; Jonas' *Life of Columbanus* (I.9,15, 17; ed B Krusch, ed, *Ionae Vitae Sanctorum, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum* (Hanover and Leipzig), pp.75,83,85).
- 97 See discussion in A L Meaney, 'The hunted and the hunters: British mammals in Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 11 (2000), pp.95–103).
- 98 Grégoire Le Grand, *Dialogues* II.xii.1–2; xviii; xx, ed. A de Vogüé, trans P Antin (3 vols, Paris, 1978–80), II, pp.174–7, 194–5, 196–7 respectively. Colgrave (1956, p.186) draws attention to two attempts on Benedict's life which have some resemblances to the Beccel incident, but both attempts used poison, and the stories do not depend so much on mind-reading; see the *Life of Benedict*, iii.3–4, viii.1–3, de Vogüé II, pp.140–3, 160–3.
- 99 Henderson (1999), p.216.
- 100 Ward (1980), p.41.
- 101 Colgrave (1956), p.190; R I Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Episcopal Lists', Parts I and II, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 9, pp.71–95; Part III, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 10, pp.2–24.
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- 104 Thacker (1977), pp.309–10. There is no need to suppose, with Henderson (1999, p.218), that Guthlac was diabetic.
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- 106 However, it appears that Sabas' body was embalmed and kept at Mar Saba until taken to Venice by Crusaders. In 1965 it was returned and now has pride of place in the main church. See D J Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Oxford 1966), pp 117–8 and plates 7–8, 14–17, and J Patrich, Sabas, *Leader of Palestinian Monasticism* (Washington DC 1995), p. 283 and plates 13, 77. Patrich's splendid volume examines the archaeological remains of Sabas' foundations and demonstrates Cyril of Scythopolis' essential accuracy.
- 107 B Colgrave and R A B Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford 1969), p.240 n. 2; see also p.234 n.1. The index confuses Æthelburh (HE III.8), with her namesake the abbess of Barking, sister of Eorcenwold bishop of London (HE IV.6)
- 108 W Rodwell, *The Archaeology of the English Church* (London 1981), p.155, fig.74.

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