

The Vignettes of St. Guthlac.

AS REPRODUCED IN THE WINDOWS OF REPTON
SCHOOL LIBRARY.

By H. VASSALL.



THE original Guthlac Roll¹ is in the Harley Collection of MSS. in the British Museum, where it can always be seen in the show-case of Illuminated MSS. It is a strip of vellum, measuring about 10 ft. by 6½ in., containing a series of eighteen circular vignettes illustrative of the life of St. Guthlac, the Hermit and Patron Saint of Crowland. The drawings are certainly late twelfth-century work, and they were probably designed by a Crowland monk for stained glass in the abbey church.

They have been excellently reproduced and described by Dr. W. de Gray Birch in *Memorials of Saint Guthlac*, 1881, and, more recently, Mr. J. A. Herbert has reproduced Nos. 3 and 10 with an appreciation of the artistic merit of the whole series in his *Illuminated Manuscripts*, 1911, in which he says: "The line has now become firm and clean. There is still a tendency to elongate the bodies and to enlarge the extremities unduly, but the lively quaintness of the characterization, whether of angels, demons, or human beings, gives these drawings an almost unique charm."

In 1904 Vignette No. V., *Guthlacus edificat sibi capellam*, was carved in stone and placed over the doorway of the new porch of Repton School Chapel.

¹ I should like to express my gratitude to Dr. Cox for all his kind help in making journeys to the British Museum to clear up points about the original Roll, and other valuable assistance.

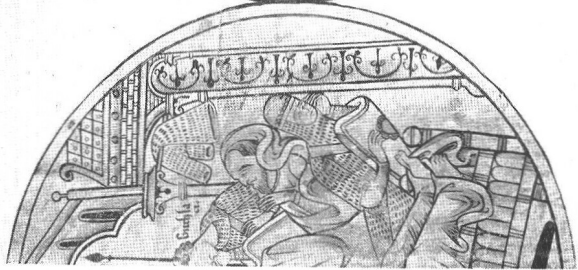
In 1909 Mr. James Powell was commissioned to reproduce the whole series in stained glass for the eighteen lights of the windows of Repton School Library. Mr. Powell had the originals photographed to the size of 16 in. by 16 in. to fit the upper part of the lower lights of the windows, and he then reproduced them in very pale green and gold tints, which give a very happy effect. The enlargement makes it possible to study the details with ease, and any member of the Society who would like to see the result of carrying out in the twentieth century the intention of the artist of the twelfth century can inspect the medallions at leisure on application at the Priory.

I.—[SOMNIUM] GUTHLACI.

Only half of the first picture has survived, and it is possible that there may have been some more, giving earlier scenes in the life of the saint. Felix of Crowland, Guthlac's biographer, who lived in the eighth century, says that he was born in 675, in the reign of Ethelred, King of Mercia, and that he died in 715. He was of noble birth, akin to the royal house. After some years of military life spent in the company of his young fellow-nobles, he was moved in a dream one night to devote himself to the service of God. This dream forms the subject of the first picture. Guthlac is to be seen asleep in the background near two spears. Others are sleeping in various postures. One is in full armour; another, apparently the leader of the band, has hung his shirt of mail above his head. Guthlac is wearing his shirt of mail, but is bareheaded.

Each medallion has a legend in Latin describing the subject of the picture. In the first the word "Guthlaci" alone survives. Probably the word "Somnium" was on the missing half.

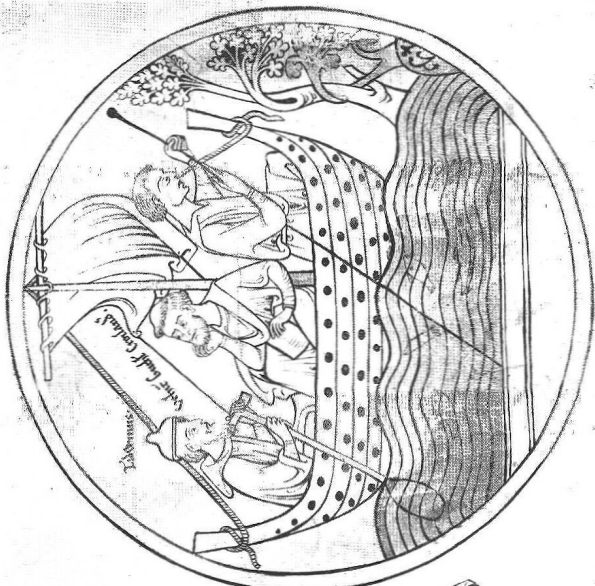
Mr. Powell has filled the blank space of the circle with some architectural details copied from the other pictures of the series, and has inserted the legend, "*Incipit vita Sancti Guthlaci Confessoris.*" The architectural details are characteristic of the twelfth century: round arches springing from



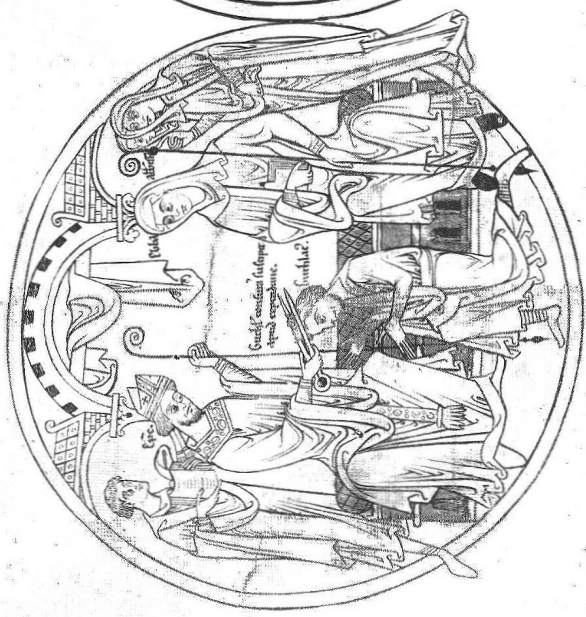
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the capitals of slender shafts, and curved finials at the ends of the roofs, which are for the most part covered with tiles fastened by a central wooden pin, though one of the series has fluted pantiles and two have lead. Mr. Powell has also added the garment hanging from a bar, of which there are no less than eight examples in the series, not counting the shirt of mail in the first picture. The artist was evidently very fond of that particular device.

II.—GUTHLACUS RECEDIT AB EXERCITU SUO.

In the second picture we see the *Commilitones* overtaking Guthlac on his way to Repton Abbey. They have dismounted from their horses, as well they might on such uneven and hummocky ground, and their leader is warning Guthlac with extended forefinger that he will repent of his resolve. Guthlac says "Avaunt," and continues on his way, in spite of their remonstrances. Guthlac is wearing a simple tunic, and has a staff in his left hand. The soldiers are in coats of mail and carry shields, short swords, and spears similar to the ones standing upright in the first picture.

III.—GUTHLACUS TONSURAM SUSCIPIT APUD REPENDUNE.

The third picture is the one of the most absorbing local interest in Repton, as it shows us Guthlac kneeling to receive the tonsure from a bishop seated on a couch in front of the buildings of Repton Abbey. The Abbess of Repton is seated at the other end of the couch, with two of her nuns standing behind her. The bishop is holding his staff in his left hand and a pair of garden shears in his right. His attendant is standing at his side with the service book open in his hands. Dr. Birch suggests that this bishop may be Hedda, Bishop of Lichfield (691-721), and warns us against confusing him with Headda, Bishop of Winchester (675-705), whom we shall find represented in the eleventh vignette.

The name given to the abbess in the picture is Ebba, but, according to Felix, her name was Aelfthrith. The Saxon

Benedictine Abbey of Repton was founded some time in the seventh century, but Dr. J. C. Cox states in the *Victoria County History, Derbyshire*, vol. 2, that nothing certain is known of its early history. Remains of Saxon walls have been found in the vicarage garden, from which two semicircular window-heads, cut out of single stones, have been removed to the crypt of the Saxon church, which was destroyed by the Danes in 874, and rebuilt probably in the latter half of the tenth century. It is quite probable that the crypt marks the site of the church of the Saxon abbey.

IV.—VEHITUR GUTHLACUS CROILANDIAM.

After two years spent in Repton Abbey, Guthlac felt a call to lead the life of a hermit in the fens between Mercia and East Anglia. A man called Tatwine offered to guide him to the desolate island of Crowland, and in the fourth picture he is seated at the foot of the mast of a very quaint little boat. The stays of the mast are made fast fore and aft, as the square sail is only suitable for sailing before the wind, and that only in quiet waters with a load of three men. Tatwine has slacked the sheets, and the sail is flapping in the breeze, whilst he steers with a spade-shaped paddle. His attendant is quonting towards the bank with a very long and slender quont, which is, unfortunately, entirely hidden from view by the leading of the window. Several little fishes are to be seen in the green water of this very charming picture.

V.—GUTHLACUS EDIFICAT SIBI CAPELLAM.

On arriving at Crowland, Guthlac proceeded to build himself a cell, with the help of his two companions. The foundations of the cell have recently been unearthed at the foot of the west front of Crowland Abbey. It was, naturally, a much more humble building than the one in the fifth picture, in which the twelfth-century artist gives us characteristic architecture of his own period. By a legitimate license he has omitted the outer wall, so that we may see the altar, with



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its altar-cloth, and the inevitable garment hanging on a beam under an arch of the arcade. Guthlac, in a somewhat uncomfortable attitude, is hauling up a basket of bricks to one of his men, who is engaged in laying the bricks with a large trowel, whilst the other is trimming a stone in a side-building of rather elaborate architecture. Both the attendants wear close-fitting caps, whilst Guthlac is bareheaded and tonsured, as in all the pictures after the second.

VI.—ANGELUS ET SANCTUS BARTHOLOMEUS LOQUUNTUR CUM
GUTHLACO.

In the sixth picture Guthlac is seen seated inside his chapel. He had reduced himself to a weak state by the austerity of the rule by which he lived. The devil had taken advantage of his opportunity to tempt him, and he is rescued from the consequent fit of despondency by a visit from his guardian angel and from his patron, Saint Bartholomew.

The artist has anticipated matters by introducing Beccelm into this picture, as, according to Felix, he became Guthlac's disciple at a somewhat later stage in the story.

VII.—DEMONES FERUNT GUTHLACUM IN AEREM CEDENTES EUM.

The demons kept up constant attacks on Guthlac, and in the seventh picture we see five of them, winged and of hideous shapes, carrying off Guthlac from his cell into the air, and beating him with knotted thongs. Meanwhile, the priest Beccelm is seated before the chalice on the altar of the chapel.

VIII.—DEMONES FERUNT GUTHLACUM AD PORTAS INFERI.

SANCTUS BARTHOLOMEUS FERT FLAGRUM GUTHLACO.

In this picture the demons have brought Guthlac to the jaws of hell, and are on the point of hurling him into it when St. Bartholomew comes to the rescue again, and gives him a whip, which became the emblem of St. Guthlac. It can be seen reproduced in stone in the statue on the west front of Crowland Abbey, and in stained glass in the founder's

window at the east end of the Pears Hall at Repton, and it appears, together with the knife of St. Bartholomew, in the arms of Crowland Abbey. The jaws of hell are vividly represented by a serpent's head reversed inside the battlements. The dentition and proboscis would certainly be unique in a reptile known to science, but are quite legitimate in such a monster as this.

Four demons are busily engaged in making room for Guthlac. One is pushing down a mitred bishop with a fork, another is seizing a crowned king by the head, two tonsured priests are waiting their turn, and one of Guthlac's tormentors is still busy with his whip.

There is a curious round hole in each of the ankles of St. Bartholomew, though one ankle is hidden by the leading of the window. St. Bartholomew is supposed to have been flayed alive at his martyrdom. Possibly these holes allude to some previous form of torture, though the artist omitted them in the sixth picture. St. Guthlac is given the halo of a saint in this and in most of the subsequent vignettes.

IX.—*DEMONES CIRCUMDANT DOMUM GUTHLACI IN DIVERSIS FORMIS BESTIARUM.*

In the ninth picture Guthlac is making good use of his famous whip. He has caught a most repulsive demon by the scruff of the neck, and is administering a sound whipping, whilst five other demons are jibbering round the corners of the chapel, ready to make good their escape as soon as ever Guthlac has finished with number one.

X.—*GUTHLACUS EJICIT DEMONIUM A QUODAM COMITE CINGULO SUO.*

In the tenth picture the artist gives us, as a specimen of the many cures wrought by Guthlac according to his biographer Felix, a very interesting representation of exorcism. Two young men have brought their companion, Egga, a follower of Ethelbald, to Guthlac to be freed from the evil spirit of



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madness which possessed him. He is evidently a dangerous lunatic, as his hands are tied together. Guthlac takes off his girdle, puts it round the sufferer, and forthwith a hideous little devil flies out of his mouth, whilst the young men look on in admiration.

XI.—GUTHLACUS SACERDOTIUM SUSCIPIT A HEDDA EPISCOPO
WINTONIENSI.

The fame of Guthlac's piety brought many visitors to Crowland, and the artist devotes the eleventh and twelfth pictures to the visits of a bishop and of a king. He calls the bishop Hedda of Winchester, and it seems possible that he has made the very mistake against which Dr. Birch warns us, of confusing Headda of Winchester with Hedda of Lichfield. Guthlac's fifteen years at Crowland began about 699, and as Headda died in 705, and Hedda outlived Guthlac, the latter is perhaps the more likely, especially as Lichfield is far nearer than Winchester to Crowland.

In this picture Guthlac is kneeling to receive ordination as priest at the hands of the *Pontifex*, who is standing in full canonicals before the altar. Five tonsured clerics are attending the service; the foremost, in an embroidered vestment, is holding the service book, which has a leathern ring, by which it can be suspended when not in use. Guthlac is holding the chalice, which he has received from the bishop. It is similar in design to the one upon the altar, and it recurs in most of the subsequent pictures.

XII.—GUTHLACUS CONSOLATUR REGEM ETHELBAIDUM
EXULEM.

The artist has anticipated events by representing Ethelbald as a king at this period of his life. He was a nephew of Penda, and was driven into exile in the fens by his cousin, who was on the throne of Mercia. He did not succeed his cousin till 716—*i.e.*, after the death of Guthlac. It will be remembered that Guthlac himself belonged to the royal

house of Mercia, and it was therefore natural that Ethelbald should pay him frequent visits during his exile, both as a saint and a relative. In this picture he is shown as a king seated on a cushioned seat, with a young man in attendance, whilst Guthlac, seated on a plain seat, is giving him words of consolation.

XIII.—GUTHLACUS LANGUENS LOQUITUR CUM BECCELMO
DISCIPULO SUO.

In the thirteenth vignette we are given a picture of Guthlac's last illness, during which he was attended by his now faithful disciple, Beccelm. There had been an occasion some years previously when Beccelm had been tempted to murder his master whilst shaving his tonsure, in the hope of usurping his place, but he had been turned from his purpose by the exhortations of Guthlac, who forgave him.

In this picture Guthlac is lying on his death-bed, with nothing but the folds of the sheet over him. Beccelm is asking him to explain to him the meaning of the voices which he had often heard conversing with Guthlac. Guthlac tells him that it was the voice of his guardian angel, who visited him daily. From this answer we can see why the artist introduced an angel as well as St. Bartholomew into the sixth picture.

XIV.—GUTHLACUS MORITUR.

This vignette is in some ways the most interesting of the whole series, as it gives us a picture of the very quaint mediæval idea of the manner of death. Guthlac is lying on his bed *in articulo mortis*; two angels come down from heaven; the *anima* issues from Guthlac's mouth in the shape of a little child; one angel receives it, and gives it, literally, a leg up to the other angel, who is waiting to catch it in a napkin and carry it off to heaven. At the same time rays of glory descend from the clouds of heaven on to Guthlac's head.



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XV.—*BECCELMUS FERT MANDATA GUTHLACI PEGE.*

Guthlac died, probably in 714, at the age of 41. The artist has skilfully graded his age from his youth to his death, though perhaps some may think that he makes him look rather older than his years in the two last pictures. The statue at Crowland and the picture in the founder's window at Repton are of a very old man, which is a mistake.

In the fifteenth picture Beccelm is carrying out Guthlac's last instructions, namely, that he should be buried by the hands of his sister, Pega, in a linen shroud and a leaden coffin, sent to him by Ecgburg, an East Anglian princess, now Abbess of Repton, from the mines at Wirksworth, the property at that time of Repton Abbey, but which were conveyed in 835 to an alderman named Humbert.

Beccelm lost no time in going to fetch Pega, and he is to be seen here helping her into the boat, which is being paddled by an attendant seated in the stern. Pega has been escorted to the bank of the river by a monk, with a walking stick in one hand and a book in the other. He is evidently not intended to make the journey, as the boat is not nearly large enough for the other three. It is of the same type as the boat in the fourth vignette, and of almost the same length, but it has no mast and much less freeboard.

In the original picture some vandal has added a pair of glasses to the nose of the man with the paddle, and a long feather to his cap, but Mr. Powell has omitted these defacements in our window.

XVI.—*HIC SEPELITUR GUTHLACUS.*

Three days later Pega buries her brother in the church, which has formed the background of most of the vignettes. She is being assisted by three monks, of whom one is helping her to lay the body in the sarcophagus, and another is reading the service from a book and swinging the censer over the body, whilst rays of glory once more come down from heaven.

XVII.—GUTHLACUS REGI ÆTHELBALDO APPARET AD
SEPULCHRUM EJUS VIGILANTI.

In the seventeenth picture Ethelbald has come on a pilgrimage to the tomb of his friend, with three attendants, who are seen asleep in the background, whilst the prince is keeping vigil all night on his knees by the sarcophagus. In the middle of the night the spirit of Guthlac appears to him, and tells him that he will soon become King of Mercia. In the very next year, 716, this prophecy was fulfilled, and the grateful Ethelbald founded the church buildings, which developed eventually into Crowland Abbey.

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In the last picture thirteen of the benefactors of Crowland Abbey are standing before the altar in front of the shrine of St. Guthlac. Each of them holds a scroll in his hands, setting forth his gifts to the abbey. They are led by King Ethelbald himself, on whose scroll is written: "Ego Rex Æthelbaldus do tibi sedem abbatie cum pertinentiis suis solutam et liberam ab omni seculari exactione." The other scrolls contain inscriptions of a similar type.

Alongside the shrine there is seated a very curious, youthful figure, with his hands bound in a shackle, and breathing out fumes from his mouth. This figure Dr. Birch interprets for us as the personification of evil held in subjection.

[The Society is indebted to Mr. Vassall for his kind help towards the expense of reproducing these interesting vignettes as illustrations to his article.—ED.]



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