

GUTHLAC: WHAT THE EARLY MEDIEVAL RECORDS TELL US

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Dorothy Whitelock was formidable, in the 1960s a force to be reckoned with, and someone I had never met. Imagine my disquiet when told she was to be one of my examiners. That day in 1967 I saw two sides of her. First, as I struggled in a cloakroom with my headgear, a small woman came over to help me, saying: 'Let me help you', chuckling in a kindly way as she tucked it neatly over my hair and asked: 'My dear, why are you so nervous?' I explained that squashy academic caps were new to me and I was in a bit of a panic because I was just about to have my viva. 'Oh', exclaimed my saviour, 'I shouldn't be talking to you', and vanished. A little later, her questioning was pretty nerve-racking until, half an hour in, Professor Campbell intervened and they fell to quarrelling. For the next two hours I watched, occasionally contributing when appealed to. At the end, Professor Campbell left Professor Whitelock to draft their report, insisting that he would drive me and my thesis to the station to deposit the hefty volumes in Left Luggage. Once that was done, he shook my hand, and whispered 'I drove you here to tell you have passed. The woman is a stickler.' He left abruptly. The only other time I saw Professor Whitelock was when I once heard her lecture some years later. A stickler she was, and therefore a redoubtable scholar, as evidenced in a succession of books and articles that have enriched our ease of access to Anglo-Saxon England.

The thesis of long ago happened to contain a transcript of Felix's *Vita Guthlaci*, the text at the centre of this talk. Both examiners generously gave me their notes on the thesis, and with their memory in mind, and with huge gratitude to Professor Wrenn and many others in the Oxford I then knew, I return to Felix's Life of Guthlac with some thoughts arising from work Taro Ishiguro and I have done together on an edition scheduled to appear next year. My talk is in two parts: the first giving a flavour of the stories about Guthlac that circulated in twelfth-century Crowland; and the second mulling over what is known about Guthlac, his England and Felix's Life of Guthlac.

A life can be memorialized in a multitude of media, fewer long ago than today. The drawing on the [poster for this talk](#) comes from a roll telling the life of Guthlac in pictures, BL, Harley MS Y. 6, put together *c.* 1200 and known as the Harley or Guthlac Roll (roundel VI; fig. 1):¹

¹ A full digital surrogate is available on the British Library website (<<https://searcharchives.bl.uk/catalog/040-002746930>> [accessed 2 June 2026] and excellent commentary may be found in the facsimile volume *The Guthlac Roll: scenes from the life of St. Guthlac of Crowland by a twelfth-century artist, reproduced from Harley Roll Y. 6 in the British Museum*; with introduction by Sir George Warner (Oxford, 1928).



Fig. 1. Harley Roll Y. 6, roundel VI. Courtesy British Library.

Nigel Morgan points out that at this time lives of saints in England ‘were depicted in monumental art, above all, stained glass, more frequently than in manuscripts’.² The Roll’s tinted drawings are, Morgan observes, in a style found in the Lincolnshire region, and he suggests the same artist was probably responsible for the drawings in the Cambridge Bestiary, perhaps from Revesby Abbey.³ He also compares an in-column line drawing in a copy of Henry of Huntingdon’s *Historia Anglorum*,⁴ the manuscript’s only illustration: a scene before the 1141 Battle of Lincoln.

Anyone constructing the story of Guthlac while moving along the scroll is made to stop and think about the roles these three figures play in the legend, perhaps even to recognize that the angel and Bartholomew are the first figures with haloes. To the left is Guthlac, seated and holding a book (his psalter?), its partially concealed binding board decorated with metalwork. He doesn’t have a halo. To the right stands the apostle Bartholomew: Guthlac, when searching for a suitably desolate place for a hermitage, arrived at Crowland on St Bartholomew’s day, and he therefore adopted Bartholomew as his patron saint. The preceding roundels had shown

² Nigel J. Morgan, *Early Gothic Manuscripts [I] 1190–1250, A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles* (London, 1982), p. 67, no. 22. Janet Backhouse and Christopher de Hamel, *The Becket Leaves* (London, 1988), p. 12, date the Harley Roll to ‘early in the thirteenth century’. A. S. Canham, ‘402. Notes on the History, Charters, and Ancient Crosses of Crowland’, *Fenland Notes and Queries* 2 (1894), 236–52, at p. 252: ‘quite recently a fragment of glass was found near the great west window with ornaments and treatment very similar to the aforesaid drawings.’

³ Cambridge, University Library, MS li.4.26, f. 8v.

⁴ Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, MS 793, f. 105r.

Guthlac being rowed through the fens, guided by a local named Tatwine (roundel IV), and the building of a chapel (roundel V; fig. 2), so the pause reminds viewers of the day Guthlac arrived at Crowland:



Fig. 2: Harley Roll Y. 6, roundel V. British Library [1], Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons:.

Above Guthlac's head in roundel VI (fig. 1) a title explains 'The angel and St Bartholomew talk with Guthlac'⁵—though hardly at the same time. As he lay dying, Guthlac revealed to Beccel that from his second year at Crowland he was visited by his angel of consolation who showed him 'mysteries which it is not lawful for man to utter', lightened 'the harshness of his suffering with heavenly revelations' and revealed 'absent things [...] as if present'. Tucked in to the right is a tiny figure, Beccel, labelled 'Beccelmus' (or 'Beccelinus').

This iconic picture breaks the story's progression, serving as a statement of the leading figures in the life of Guthlac. In the next scene (roundel VII), five demons carry Guthlac up into the air above elaborate buildings: no book is to be seen. Beccel, bottom left quarter, may be about to prepare for communion; one can only suppose he'll hear all about it later. The devils have horrible mouths that protrude like spouts and bring to mind the word *tutel* 'spout', found only in the *Ancrene Riwe*, leading d'Ardenne to wonder if this word expressed 'clearly the images

⁵ 'Angelus. et Sanctus Barthomeus loquuntur cum Guthlaco'.

in illustrated psalters and manuscripts of the lives of saints, familiar to anchoresses'.⁶ St Martin confronts a similar demon in the mid-eleventh-century *Caligula Troper*.⁷ The title at the top of the next picture (roundel VIII; fig. 3) reads: 'Demons carry Guthlac to the gates of hell'. Demons, busy with pitchforks, are shoving sinners into the open jaws of Leviathan—a bishop, a couple of monks, a king:



Fig. 3: *Harley Roll Y. 6, roundel VIII. British Library [1], Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Guthlac escapes, and for the first time has a halo. A second title says: 'St Bartholomew brings a whip to Guthlac'. In his left hand Bartholomew holds a splendid codex, its visible binding-board encrusted with jewels and metalwork, perhaps about to return it to Guthlac.

In Felix's *Life of Guthlac*, no whip is given to him nor is a lost book mentioned, but stories about both must have been popular at Crowland. The poet Henry of Avranches clearly knew some such tradition.⁸ He tells of a day when (ll. 453–57) 'Saint Guthlac was occupied

⁶ S. R. T. O. d'Ardenne, 'The Devil's Spout', *Transactions of the Philological Society* 45.1 (1946), 31–55 at 45.

⁷ London, British Library, Cotton MS *Caligula A.* xiv, f. 26v.

⁸ Henry d'Avranches was in England by 1219, moving to the papal court c. 1228: Peter Binkley, 'Avranches, Henry d' (d. 1262/3), poet', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, September 23, 2004) <<https://0-www-oxforddnb-com.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-37529>> [accessed 5 October 2025].

with prayers and psalms and by chance carrying his psalter not in either hand but under his arm'; demons seized him, taking him through the air and plunging him 'into the black marshes' (l. 465) from which Guthlac only just managed 'to escape alive' though his psalter slipped away into the water. But it was only mislaid, 'for after seven years he miraculously came upon it undamaged under the water' (l. 468) and Crowland has it still 'bound in silver and gemstones, lest the event should go forgotten, and its every letter is still visible there, with scarcely a smudge' (–l. 475);⁹ and while Guthlac is chanting psalms at the gates of hell, Bartholomew arrives to arm him with a whip¹⁰ and Guthlac, then and there, 'avenged the ills he had endured unarmed' (roundel IX). In the Harley Roll's next scene Guthlac, about to put the whip into action, clutches an ox-headed demon by the neck; the demons here resemble demons in a later chapter in *Felix* (ch. 36).¹¹

Stories of the whip were well enough known for it to symbolize Guthlac. He holds a whip on Crowland Abbey's west front, and may be lashing a demon at the centre of the tympanum:



Fig. 4: Crowland Abbey's West Front. Thorvaldsson, CC BY 3.0
<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

⁹ David Townsend (ed. and trans.), *Saints' Lives. Henry of Avranches*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 31 and 32 (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2014), II, pp. 42–43, ll. 453–75.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, II, pp. 42–43, lines 543–44: 'et inde | uindicat armatus mala que tolerauit inermis',

¹¹ Are they the precursors of the seven deadly sins? Compare the demons in Henry d'Avranches, II, pp. 58–61, lines 759–69.

The April page in some almanacs had a whip alert for his feast day, for example the Physician's Almanac of 1411–1412.¹² The thirteenth-century common seal of the abbot and convent of Croyland, in use up to the Dissolution of the monasteries, displays two standing figures under a canopy, one holding a whip: Guthlac and Bartholomew, though which is which is hard to tell.¹³ The monks of nearby Thorney had in their collection of relics part of Guthlac's whip.¹⁴ Crowland Abbey's arms were knives and whips (the knives in honour of St Bartholomew, who was flayed alive).¹⁵ As late as 1670 the halfpenny for relief of the poor of Crowland had whips and knives on it. The hugely inventive *Historia Croylandensis*¹⁶ records that Pege, Guthlac's sister left the psalter and whip with other relics at Crowland before setting out to Rome.¹⁷ Even a generation or so after the Dissolution of the monasteries, John Foxe tells of having seen in Crowland a book 'kept there for a relike [...] called S. Guthlakes Psalter'. Foxe thought the psalter was the one 'the kyng did translate, for it is neither English, Latine, Greke, Hebrue, nor Dutche, but somewhat soundyng to our English.'¹⁸ Just what Foxe saw in Crowland is tantalizing, maybe a copy of King Alfred's translation.

John Leland, when he visited the disestablished monastery, made notes about a book he saw there, now in France (Douai, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 852). Douai 852 contains the only manuscript copy of Felix's Life to have survived from Crowland. Its opening two booklets are on Guthlac and Crowland Abbey. The first, ff. 2–46, contains Felix's Life followed by an account of a translation of Guthlac's body in 1136¹⁹ and what remains of a collection of posthumous miracles. The second booklet, ff. 47–52, is in a later hand:²⁰

¹² London, British Library, Harley MS 2332, f. 4v. Six instances in almanacs of the scourge as Guthlac's emblem are identified by Kathleen Doyle, 'Opening up representations of saints in English folded almanacs', in *Tributes to Elly Miller: opening manuscripts*, ed. Stella Panayotova and Lucy Freeman Sandler (London, 2024), pp. 66–87, at p. 86.

¹³ T. A. Heslop, 'The Conventual Seals of Crowland Abbey', in *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, ed. Jane Roberts and Alan Thacker (Donington, 2020), pp. 274–76.

¹⁴ In an arm reliquary in the third list, London, British Library, Add. MS 40,000, f. 11v. See Francis Wormald, *English Benedictine Kalendars after A. D. 1100*, 2 vols, Henry Bradshaw Society 77, 81 (1939, 1946), I, p. 130. See also Lynda Rollason, 'The Thorney Relic-List, f. 11v', in *The Thorney Liber vitae: London, British Library, Additional MS 40,000, fols 1–12r: edition, facsimile and study*, ed. Lynda Rollason (Woodbridge, 2015), pp. 277–83.

¹⁵ There was a yearly St Bartholomew's Fair in August, when those who ate in the Abbey's hall could keep 'the knife they had laid to their plate'; the knives provided in the year of Dissolution were thrown into the river in anger. J. M. Gresley, *Some Account of Croyland Abbey, Lincolnshire, from the MSS. and Drawings of William Stukeley, Read at the General Meeting of the Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society . . .* (Ashby de la Zouch, 1856), p. 5.

¹⁶ In the part attributed to Abbot Ingulf. For a useful overview, see William Hunt, 'Ingulf (d. 1109)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

<<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/odnb/9780192683120.001.0001/odnb-9780192683120-e-14422>> [accessed 27 September 2025]. See also David Roffe, 'The *Historia Croylandensis*: A Plea for Reassessment', *English Historical Review* 110, no. 435 (1995), 93–108.

¹⁷ W. Fulman, *Rerum anglicarum scriptorum ueterum*, I (Oxford, 1684), p. 5; Henry T. Riley (trans.), *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland*, Bohn's Antiquarian Library (London, 1854; repr. London: Bell, 1908), p. 9. According to Orderic, after Guthlac's death Pege decided to go to Rome, where she died (Marjorie Chibnall (ed. and trans.), *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, 6 vols, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1969–80), II, p. 344; cf. Douai 852, f. 53v/18. The *Old English Martyrology* entry for Pega (9 January) includes her death in Rome.

¹⁸ John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable* (London, 1570), VIII, p. 1312: *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* or TAMO (Sheffield, 2011). Available from: <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/>> [accessed 19 August 2025].

¹⁹ During the abbacy of Geoffrey of Orleans (1110–38).

²⁰ Timothy A. Bolton, 'Guthlac, Walthoef, Crowland and Douai Bibliothèque municipale, MS 852', in *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, ed. Roberts and Thacker, pp. 408–25, items 3 and 4.

folios	contents
f. 1	Flyleaf, medieval like f. 207 at the end.
f. 2rv	Originally blank. Translation of St Neot (1213), attributed to William of Ramsey; and s. xiii contents list in space at end.
ff. 3r–32r	<i>Vita sancti Guthlaci</i> (with additional ending).
ff. 32v–46v	<i>Translacio</i> <i>Miracula sancti Guthlaci</i> . (ending lost).
ff. 47r–52r	<i>Abbreviatio de uita sancti Guthlaci</i> .
ff. 52v–56v	<i>Gesta Abbatum Croylandie</i> . ²¹

Table 1. Douai 852's opening booklets; titles in italics from f. 2v

The last words on the penultimate line of f. 31r are the closing words of Felix's Life of Guthlac. The last line of this page opens an elaborate addition, continuing overleaf: 'After hearing the reports of holy Guthlac's miracles, many others afflicted by many kinds of infirmities also come to marshy Crowland, where the sacred body rests, and they give thanks to God after attaining sound health by his merits'.²² The story of King Æthelbald's grant by charter follows,²³ made, we are told, because Guthlac had once asked him 'for a quiet residence on that island' ('quietam mansionem in eadem insula'), and the story tells how the king had oak piles driven into the boggy ground for an abbey's foundations, how he replaced Guthlac's wooden oratory with a stone church and established a monastery that was never without monks 'up to the present day' ('usque in hodiernum diem caruit'). Further elaboration of the Life's new ending includes an anonymous nine-line poem.²⁴

Taro Ishiguro and I edit Douai's new ending as Appendix 4 because of its widespread influence.²⁵ The passage from the last line of f. 31r to 'caruit' on the fifth line of f. 32r was composed in or after 1119 by the historian Orderic Vitalis when he visited Crowland.²⁶ Orderic later used much of what he had recorded at Crowland in the fourth book of his *Ecclesiastical History*,²⁷ including his epitome of Felix's Life of Guthlac and details of the later history of Crowland as related to him by Ansgot (the sub-prior) and his fellow monks. They told him what they remembered; but memories are faulty. Orderic's description of Felix as a bishop, identifying him falsely with Felix of Burgundy, the first bishop of East Anglia (d. c.647–48), could have come from them. Orderic's epitome, an accurate abridgement of Felix's Life,²⁸

²¹ The line 'Explicit De Sancto Guthlaci. Incipiunt Gesta aBBatum Croylandie.' added on f. 52r below the writing block, divides this material into two texts.

²² Cf. Chibnall, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, p. 338, ll. 5–8.

²³ Cf. Chibnall, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, p. 338, l. 5–p. 340, l. 4 'Multi quoque alii diuersis infirmitatibus [...] diem caruit'. The opening of Douai 852's *Gesta abbatum Croylandie* corresponds to Chibnall, p. 340, l. 4, 'Kenulfus quidam [...]'.
[...].

²⁴ On the anonymous poem that completes Douai's *Vita*, see further Roberts and Thacker, 'Introduction', in their *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, p. xxxiv.

²⁵ The earliest printed text, in L. d'Achéry and Jean Mabillon, *Acti sanctorum ordinis sancti Benedicti* (Paris, 1672), saec. III, pt I, pp. 263–84, is from Douai 852, and ends at the end of the Orderic addition. The Bollandists, recognizing where Felix's text ends, present the Orderic passage as an addition: *Acta sanctorum* (1675), AASS Aprilis II, pp. 37–60, at p. 50.

²⁶ At the invitation of Geoffrey of Orleans (abbot 1109–c.1124). See Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Woodbridge, 1984), p. 36: 'not later than 1125'. See also Richard Sharpe, 'Peter of Blois and Abbot Henry de Longchamp', in *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, ed. Roberts and Thacker, pp. 448–72, at p. 461, who gives 1124 as the date of Orderic's visit.

²⁷ Chibnall, *Ecclesiastic History*, II, pp. xxvi, xxxix.

²⁸ The only significant divergence from Felix's *Vita* in the body of the text is the addition of the day on which Bishop Headda ordained Guthlac, 21 August, a date that must by then have been in Crowland's yearly round of

corresponds to the *Abbreviatio* in Douai 852's second booklet, which ends two lines from the bottom of f. 51v. Orderic then explains that what follows is added, from 'Hvc usque' in the last two lines of f. 51v up to 'Rex' in the third line of the facing recto: 'Up to this point I have followed in summary what is written about the venerable Guthlac by Bishop Felix'.²⁹ Orderic's explanation is not in the Douai Life of Guthlac and was probably omitted intentionally. At any rate, during litigation with Spalding Priory that began in Abbot Robert's days (1175–1191), reference is made to the account 'in the life of the saint written in the old days' as supporting the abbey's foundation over four hundred years earlier.³⁰ The elaborated ending of Crowland's twelfth-century copy of Felix's Life with its poem about the lovely place that is Crowland fits easily in its twelfth-century context,³¹ a context remote in time from pre-Viking Britain and sufficiently credulous for the development of the new and even headier Crowland legends of the first two parts of the *Historia Croylandensis*.



Fig. 5: Harley Roll Y. 6, roundel XVIII. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

services; the feast is recorded in a fifteenth-century Crowland calendar (London, Lambeth Palace Library MS 873).

²⁹ 'Hvc usque felicitis episcopi scripta de uenerabili guthlaco breuiter secutus sum [...].'

³⁰ The First Continuation of the *Historia Croylandensis* is recognized as a valuable record of the dispute: see Doris M. Stenton, *English Justice between the Norman Conquest and the Great Charter 1066–1215* (London, 1965), pp. 154–55 (*in vita ipsius sancti ab olim scripta*).

³¹ As pointed out by Catherine A. M. Clarke, *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700–1400* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 67–89, Crowland therefore has, like Glastonbury, Ramsey, Downham and Ely, a *locus amoenus* poem.

Twelfth-century Crowland believed in the continuous history of its abbey and celebrated its endowments. On roundel XVIII of the Guthlac Roll (fig. 5), King Æthelbald leads twelve other donors; they are presented beside a shrine raised on steps. To the right a sample miracle is illustrated, a suffering man, bound to prevent him from damaging himself; a demon leaves his mouth, so perhaps Hwætred, the young East Anglian nobleman healed in ch. 41 of the Life. All thirteen donors hold scrolls announcing benefactions, two addressing Father Guthlac ('pater Guthlace') directly as the recipient of their gifts.³² Æthelbald is remembered as having granted legal rights: 'Ego Rex Ethelbaldus [...]' ('I, King Æthelbald give you the seat of the abbey with appurtenances outright and free from every secular tax'), the ahistoric tradition first recorded by Orderic.³³ Next to King Æthelbald is Abbot Thurkytel, about two and a half centuries later. Other than Æthelbald, there are no donors earlier than Thurkytel. The latest, Alan de Craon, who gave properties in the middle of the twelfth century, is at the back, and in between are men mostly identifiable as linked to the lands they gave the abbey.³⁴ As for Æthelbald's charter, I refer you to Elizabeth Danbury's examination of the illuminated *inspeximus* of Richard II (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 1831) and its letters-patent enrolment 7 July 1393 (London, National Archives, C66/338, membrane 31). Orderic, on his visit to Crowland, could have been shown the splendid twelfth-century forgery, now lost but published by George Hickes in 1703.³⁵

There were stories of encounters with angels at Guthlac's death. Felix relates that when he died 'the expanse of all the air was heard reverberating with angelic song' (ch. 50). One Harley scene (roundel XIV) shows angels retrieving Guthlac's soul as it leaves his body. Long before the twelfth century the Exeter Book poem *Guthlac A* opens with a righteous soul at death. An angel comes to meet the soul, to carry it forwards over broad paths, joyfully, amidst great light, motifs that reflect three pronouncements made by angels in homilies and apocryphal gospels as they approach a dying soul.³⁶ A question is posed, how should a man behave on earth to merit such an end? The poet reworks the temptations of Guthlac as debate between demons and the saint, with Guthlac an example of a righteous soul.³⁷ And in what remains of *Guthlac B*, death is a hunter attacking Guthlac's *sawelhus* (the house of his soul, ll. 1139–41), a *wiga* (a warrior opponent, ll. 999, 1033) and *feond* (enemy / devil, l. 864),³⁸ until, at death, angels take Guthlac's *gæst* (soul) on its upward journey to heaven's eternal bliss:

ÐA wæs Guðlace gæst gelæded
eadig on upweg; englas feredun
to þam longan gefean; lic colode,
belifd under lyfte. (ll. 1305–08)

³² 'Frogistus' to 'pater Guthlace'; 'Alanus' to 'pater Guthlace'.

³³ Chibnall, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, pp. xxviii, 336.

³⁴ Jane Roberts, 'Guthlac on a Roll: BL, Harley MS Y. 6', in *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, ed. Roberts and Thacker, pp. 242–73, at p. 273.

³⁵ Elizabeth Danbury, 'Richard II and St Guthlac', in *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, ed. Roberts and Thacker, pp. 473–84, who demonstrates (p. 378) that the lost forgery 'must almost certainly have been in the royal chancery in the late fourteenth century'. Gresley, *Some Account of Croyland Abbey*, p. 2, reports documents including 'the goulden charters' were still extant in a black box in the sixteenth century, but, according to Richard Gough (1782, 1784) all had then gone. See also the entry for Crowland in *Kemble: The Anglo-Saxon Charters Website* <<https://dk.robinson.cam.ac.uk/node/>>.

³⁶ For example, see: Rudolph Willard, *Two Apocrypha in Old English Homilies*, Beiträge zur englischen Philologie, 30 (Leipzig, 1935); Mary Frances Wack and Charles D. Wright, 'A New Latin Source for the Old English Three Utterances Exemplum', *Anglo-Saxon England* 20 (1991), 187–202; Stephen Pelle, *New Latin Contexts for Old English Homilies: Editions and Studies of Ten Sources and Analogues* (Toronto, 2023), pp. 320–51.

³⁷ See Jane Roberts (ed.), *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 29–36.

³⁸ See Jane Roberts, 'Death the Grim Hunter', in *Old English Tradition: Essays in Honor of J. R. Hall*, ed. Lindy Brady, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 578 (Tempe AZ, 2021), pp. 21–35 (30–31).

[Then Guthlac's soul was taken happy / blessed on its journey upwards, angels conducting [it] to everlasting bliss; his body grew chill beneath the heavens, stripped of life.]

The Vercelli Book's collection of Old English prose and poetry ends with a Guthlac homily—the three temptations taken from an early Mercian translation of Felix's Life,³⁹ plus an abrupt ending:

7 þa æfter þam fleah se haliga Guðlac mid þam apostole *sancte* Bartholomei to heofona rices wuldre, 7 hine se Hælend þær onfeng. 7 he þær leofað 7 rixaþ in heofona rices wuldre a butan ende on ecnesse. Amen. Fi[a]t.

[And then after that the holy Guthlac flew with Saint Bartholomew the apostle to the glory of heavens' kingdom, and the Saviour received him there. And He lives there and reigns in the glory of the kingdom of heaven forever without end into eternity. Amen. So be it.]

There is no return to the hermitage. Instead St Bartholomew takes Guthlac straight up to heaven.

In liturgy too and its music Guthlac was celebrated in song cycles sung on his feast day. Two manuscripts, one from Worcester, the other from Canterbury, 'transmit twenty-seven notated compositions for use on Guthlac's feast, twenty-two of them unique to Guthlac'.⁴⁰ Henry Parkes points out that 'the survival of two separate offices for one Anglo-Saxon saint is without precedent in this period',⁴¹ arguing that the Canterbury / Crowland 'office composition straddles the period in which English monks renewed their adherence to the content of the Benedictine Rule'.⁴² A fine gradual from Crowland Abbey, from the second quarter of the thirteenth century,⁴³ has Guthlac sequences and a sequence for his sister Pege.

Bartholomew and the angel of consolation (see fig. 1, p. 2) are central to Guthlac's devotional life at Crowland, but what of Beccel? Felix does give him his own chapter (ch. 35), but essentially he is a listener and a messenger; he is not named in *Guthlac B*, the Exeter Book poem on Guthlac's death.⁴⁴ It is Beccel who asks the dying Guthlac 'about one thing that for a long time now I have been troubled about without daring to question you [...] From the time when I began to live with you, my lord, I used to hear you talking, I don't know who with, in the evenings and in the mornings', first learning about the angel of consolation, Beccel who carries out Guthlac's last instructions. There is an anonymous late life of a St Bertellin, known

³⁹ The most recent edition of Vercelli Homily XXIII is by D. G. Scragg (ed.), *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, EETS, o.s. 300 (Oxford, 1992), pp. 383–92. The contemporary popularity of this sort of visionary material is evident in the compilation drawn together by Peter of Cornwall (c. 1140–1221), who drew substantial extracts from Felix's *vita*. See Robert Easting and Richard Sharpe (ed. and trans.), *Peter of Cornwall's 'Book of Revelations'* (Toronto, 2013), pp. 541–42.

⁴⁰ Henry Parkes, 'Musical Portraits of St Guthlac', in *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, ed. Roberts and Thacker, pp. 277–97, at p. 282.

⁴¹ Parkes, 'Musical Portraits', p. 286.

⁴² Parkes, 'Musical Portraits', p. 287.

⁴³ London, British Library, Egerton MS 3759.

⁴⁴ Phyllis Brown, 'Beccel and the Theme of Death in *Guthlac B*', *Medievalia* 19 (1996 for 1993), 273–98.

only from a collection of saints' lives printed in 1516,⁴⁵ a curious mix of romance and hagiographic clichés plus large chunks from Felix's Life of Guthlac, though understandably not chapter 35 (Beccel's temptation to kill Guthlac). But confusion with other saints is likely, and both the saint's name and date of the feast are disputed.

II

In the first part of my talk, I looked at how key miraculous figures in the Life were understood and worked anew in records extant from the tenth to twelfth/thirteenth centuries. I now turn back to the eighth-century context in which Felix, commissioned by King Ælfwald of East Anglia (r. 713–49), put the Life together. For Stenton, Felix's Life of Guthlac is 'the one historical document that has come down to us from the ancient Mercian kingdom'.⁴⁶ But Colgrave points out that, when compared with the 'historical writing' of Bede's *Lives of the Abbots*, the anonymous Life of Ceolfrith and Eddius's Life of Wilfrid, Felix's Life of Guthlac is essentially hagiography. Colgrave summarizes historical details culled from the Life, information that is, Dorothy Whitelock noted, 'all the more trustworthy in that it is given only incidentally, by writers with no axe to grind'.⁴⁷ There is no need to list the details anew. Instead I shall reassess how, when and why the Life was written.

The new edition differs from Colgrave's eclectic text,⁴⁸ having as its base a single early manuscript copy. From the thirteen manuscript witnesses to Felix's Life, ranging in date from an eighth- or early ninth-century fragment to the fourteenth century, we narrowed the contenders down to three tenth-century copies, choosing Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 389, ff. 18r–66r, as having the most reliable text. We set aside London, British Library, Royal MS 13 A. xv, ff. 1r–45r, which lacks the prologue and chapter list, and the somewhat earlier Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 307, ff. 1r–52r, but we give full collations for these manuscripts. Collations from the other manuscripts and Colgrave's edition are supplied where necessary. Seven manuscripts, including the earliest witness and the two Corpus manuscripts, contain a fairly stable contents list, usually fifty-three numbered chapters,⁴⁹ numbers used by editors of the Life from Gough (1753)⁵⁰ forwards and therefore noted. This contents list may not go back to Felix; only Corpus 307 gives its numbers throughout the text, added after the whole was written.

The Guthlac Life, as is the case with so many saints' lives, can seem so much 'a tissue of quotations'⁵¹ that some have questioned its veracity, forgetting that our concerns about plagiarism contrast with medieval expectations of hagiography. Resonances from earlier Lives and biblical phrases help validate the story being told. Felix's prefatory letter to Ælfwald, with its adulatory

⁴⁵ By Wynkyn de Worde, See Carl Horstman, (ed.), *Nova legenda anglie*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1901), I, pp. 162–67. Recently discussed by Lindy Brady, 'St Bertelme of Fécamp: St Bertellin of Stafford by another name', *Notes and Queries* 63 (2016), 194–16. See also Taro Ishiguro and Jane Roberts, eds, *Felix's Life of St Guthlac and Its Two Old English Versions, with Facing Translations in Modern English* (Liverpool, 2026), pp. 71–72.

⁴⁶ Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1971), 178.

⁴⁷ Dorothy Whitelock, Review of *The Earliest Saints' Lives Written in England* by Bertram Colgrave (Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture [London, 1959]), *English Historical Review* 76, no. 298 (1961), 119–20, at p. 119.

⁴⁸ Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans.), *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1956).

⁴⁹ The fifty-three titles in the chapter list are fairly stable in wording in seven manuscripts. Its entries are numbered throughout in four manuscripts (C₂E₁ C₁ B), i–lii in N where the final number is missed out, and in R are numbered up to ch. 35, where the fragment ends; in C₁ chapter numbers were placed in the outer margins after the text was copied; D does not have chapter numbers.

⁵⁰ Gough's chapters are numbered up to ch. 52 which contains chs 52–53: Richard Gough, *The History and Antiquities of Croyland-Abbey, in the County of Lincoln*, Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica 21 (London, 1783).

⁵¹ Phrase from Bertram Colgrave, *The Earliest Saints' Lives Written in England*, Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture (London, 1959), p. 51.

opening phrases that echo wording used by Aldhelm to address the learned King Aldfrith of Northumbria, may by allusion flatter the East Anglian king, but despite the often close weave of recognisable phrases, both it and the following narrative are tightly crafted. King Ælfwald, at the end of genealogical records for his family line,⁵² is little documented,⁵³ but a letter he sent to Boniface suggests he was a man of some learning.⁵⁴ Felix could have been a cleric in his household.⁵⁵ Stylistically, his Life of Guthlac stands apart from the early Northumbrian saints' lives, its Latin difficult in the way Aldhelm's Latin is difficult, sharing Aldhelm's delight in exotic neologisms and abounding in resonances from the Bible, especially the psalms, from earlier saints' lives, from Aldhelm, from Vergil—Felix clearly had access to well-stocked book chests. Its heavy recourse to Bede's prose Life of Cuthbert indicates a date after 720,⁵⁶ with the likely date of composition in the 720s or the 730s.

The commissioning of the Life is recorded also in an acrostic poem in Corpus 307; its ten lines look like a book poem made to accompany a copy of the Life sent to King Ælfwald. The poem celebrates the completion well before the first day of December of a requested Life of Guthlac:

E go licet uilis uernaculus crist	I :
A diuuatus gratia iusta depingen	S :
D omino donante digne quae feci	T :
V ota gud uenimus ad summ	A
V oluminis istius fuerunt quip	P' :
A d decembri [k]alendas dies putat	I :
L uide uiginti uos deprecor exi	N : [fol. 52v]
D elere u[t] dignetur debita re	X :
V iuenti preces fundere patr	I :
S emper in <i>secula</i> cui <i>gloria</i> mane	t :

[With the help of [God's] grace, I, but a humble servant of Christ, setting forth the righteous vows that Guth[lac] made in a fitting manner, as God permitted. As you can see, we have come to the end of this book. There were clearly twenty days counted before the first day of December. So I entreat that you the king deign to remit the obligation [and] pour out prayers to the living Lord, Whose is the glory for ever and ever.]

Reading down the left-hand side the first letters spell out *EADWALDVS* and reading back up the last letters *ISTA PINXIT*: Eadwald made this. Seemingly, the Corpus 307 scribe has reproduced the exemplar's lay-out. The author's name is Eadwald: the first part *ead*, meaning 'happy' or 'blessed', suggests a native name corresponding to Felix, a name that could have

⁵² Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 210.

⁵³ PASE [*Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England*] Database <<https://pase.ac.uk>>, 'Ælfwald 6'.

⁵⁴ Michael Tangl (ed.), *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae Selectae 1 (Berlin, 1916), no. 81.

⁵⁵ Suggested by Catherine Cubitt, 'Memory and narrative in the cult of the early Anglo-Saxon saints', in *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (Cambridge, 2000), 29–66, at p. 56. More recently, Paul Everson and David Stocker, 'Guthlac at Medeshamstede?', *Early Medieval Europe* 31.2 (2023), 194–219, argue that Felix could have been a Peterborough monk. No place is connected with Felix; Repton, where Guthlac spent two years, is sometimes suggested.

⁵⁶ The dates for its composition range between c.720 and 726; George Hardin Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Woodbridge, 2009), p. 16, gives the date c.720.

been taken in honour of Bishop Felix of Burgundy.⁵⁷ Andy Orchard points out that Felix identifies himself in similar wording in the Prologue: ‘Felix’, ‘uernaculus [...] in Cristo’; and the word ‘depinxī’ later in the Prologue corresponds with the poem’s ‘depingenS’ (l. 2).⁵⁸

Felix makes it clear both in the Prologue and at beginning of chapter 28 that he is reliant on second-hand information, naming only two of his informants: Wilfrid, witness of some of the miracles recorded, termed abbot only in the Prologue, could have gained preferment when Æthelbald was king of Mercia, becoming Wilfrith, bishop of Worcester (718–43x5);⁵⁹ and Cissa, Guthlac’s successor, mentioned otherwise only in chapter 48, when Guthlac sends word to Abbess Ecgburh that his successor was as yet unbaptized and living among pagans. There is no feast-day entry for Cissa in the English calendars from before 1100.⁶⁰ The later part of the List of Resting Places of God’s Saints records that his body lay in Thorney,⁶¹ and, according to Abbot Folcard of Thorney, Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester, had his body translated there.⁶²

The narrative Felix constructed from what his informants knew has four parts: before Guthlac’s solitary life (chs 1–27); the demonic temptations of the settling in period at Crowland (chs 28–33); a selection of miraculous events (chs 34–49); death and its aftermath (chs 50–53). Something not generally recognized is just how much is without influences and resonances identified in earlier works,⁶³ particularly in the first part. The opening details are historical. Guthlac was born in the days of King Æthelred of Mercia (r. 674/5–704). His parents are named: Penwallh, of the Mercian royal lineage that goes back to Icel, and Tette (chs 1–4), living among the Middle Angles. A cross stands before the house where the child is born—miraculously, light from a glittering red-gold hand stretches towards its shoulder before disappearing into the heavens. The name Guthlac given at christening lends itself to conventional hagiographical wordplay: *belli munus* (the reward of war) with *lac* meaning ‘gift, reward’ (DOE *lāc* 3);⁶⁴ but the added detail that that it comes ‘from the name of the people they call the Guthlacings’, a tribal name not otherwise recorded, suggests rather the meaning ‘play, combat’ (DOE *lāc* 1). So much detail contrasts markedly with the little the two Lives of St Cuthbert reveal about Cuthbert’s early life. So too do passages (chs 16–18) about Guthlac’s warfaring years and decision to enter religion (fig. 6) when compared with Bede’s suppression

⁵⁷ Further, see Michael Lapidge, ‘Felix’, in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd edn, ed. Michael Lapidge and others (Chichester, 2014), p. 186. See also Ishiguro and Roberts, eds, *Felix’s Life of St Guthlac: Crowland’s Saint*, pp. 100–01, for tentative identification with an abbot of Muchelney.

⁵⁸ Andy Orchard, ‘*Lege feliciter, scribe felicius*: The Originality of the *Vita S. Guthlac*’, in *Guthlac*, ed. Roberts and Thacker, pp. 25–54, at p. 52.

⁵⁹ Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 3 (Cambridge, 1990), p. 172, n. 135, attributing this identification to Patrick Wormald, points out that it ‘would require a very early date for the *Vita*’.

⁶⁰ Not found in Rebecca Rushforth, *Saints in English Calendars before A.D. 1100*, Henry Bradshaw Society 117 (Woodbridge, 2008).

⁶¹ For the *Seggan be þam Godes sanctum þe on Engla lande ærost reston*, see Felix Liebermann (ed.), *Die Heiligen Englands* (Hannover, 1889), pp. 15–16, no. 27, i.e. London, British Library, Add. 40.000, f. 11v/8, Sancti Cissi anachorite, in the list dated to ‘the end of the first decade of the twelfth century’ (Rollason, ‘Thorney Relic-List’, p. 279). See also Wormald, *English Benedictine Calendars*, I, p. 129.

⁶² Alison Hudson, *Bishop Æthelwold, his Followers, and Saints’ Cults in Early Medieval England: Power, Belief, and Religious Reform*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 43 (Woodbridge, 2022), pp. 145 and n. 127, 146, 148. The ‘Translatio’ is securely attributable to Folcard: see Cecily Clark, ‘Notes on a Life of Three Thorney saints, Thancred, Torhtred and Tova’, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 69 (1980), 45–52.

⁶³ Ishiguro and Roberts, eds, *Felix’s Life of St Guthlac*, pp. 12–23, 91–99.

⁶⁴ *Dictionary of Old English: A to Le Online*, ed. by Angus Cameron and others (Toronto, 2024): <<https://doe.artsci.utoronto.ca>>.

of Cuthbert's 'direct involvement in at least one Northumbrian campaign', recorded in the earlier anonymous Life that was one of Bede's sources.⁶⁵



Fig. 6: Harley Roll Y. 6, roundel 2. British Library, [1], Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

At Repton in Abbess Ælfhryth's day the 24-year-old novice received the Petrine tonsure (Harley Roll Y. 6, roundel III)⁶⁶, and at first earned the hatred of his fellow monks for refusing all alcohol except at communion. Guthlac became 'skilled in letters' at Repton, learning the psalter and monastic routines and reading the Lives of the desert fathers. These chapters include not only the earliest recorded reference to Repton, where the pre-Viking crypt confirms

⁶⁵ See James Campbell, 'Elements in the Background to the Life of St Cuthbert and his Early Cult', in *St Cuthbert, his Community and his Cult to AD 1200*, ed. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason and Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 3–10, at p. 4.

⁶⁶ In a 'markedly anachronistic' ceremony: Cynthia Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart. Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2003), p. 176.

the early existence of fine stone building, but also the only evidence that Repton was then a double monastery.

Generally, there are no chapter headings for chs 1–24 in this first part, except that a heading not in the chapter list occurs in the middle of ch. 24 in four manuscripts,⁶⁷ among them our base manuscript, Corpus 389, f. 28v: ‘De heremo palustri’ (‘About the fenland hermitage’), standing before Felix’s description of the fens. Coincidentally, this heading corresponds with a major division in the Old English Life,

Old English Life

Vrum Wealdende ...

I

II

III

IIII Be þam halgan were, hu he
eardode on þære stówe. (this section
has first heading)

Vita sancti Guthlaci

Prologue

[1–9]

[10–24] ‘[...] inuenire perrexerit.’

[24] from ‘Est in mediterraneis [...]’ – [27]
(after heading ‘De heremo palustri’)

[28]–[33] (chapter [28] has first chapter heading
since the opening chapter)

in which the untitled section divisions within its early part suggest it was translated from an early manuscript that grouped together chs 1–9, then chs 10–24 up to ‘... inuenire perrexerit’. Its third section also begins at the description of the fens. The titles 25–27 in the *Vita*’s chapter list have helped give rise to learned discussion of a second feast day for Bartholomew three months after Guthlac’s arrival at Crowland in August,⁶⁸ a non-existent discrepancy.⁶⁹ The chapter list and the numbering and entitling of chapters are examined in a forthcoming article by Taro Ishiguro.⁷⁰

Chapter 28, where the Crowland part of Guthlac’s life begins, is where chapter headings corresponding to the chapter list start appearing regularly. The Harley Roll’s image of Guthlac’s settling in (see fig. 2, p. 3) conjures up the beginnings of the Norman abbey rather than ‘the little hut’ (*tugurio*) on top of what looked like a cistern in the side of an ancient mound—once robbers had dug there seeking treasure (the first recorded instance of grave-robbing in Britain); in the Harley drawing Guthlac wears a monk’s habit instead of his ‘clothes made from

⁶⁷ Two are closely related to Corpus 389: Dublin, Trinity College (TCD), MS 174, ff. 73r–85r/39 [E₁] and London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero E. i, pt i, ff. 185r–96r [N]. The heading must also have been in the exemplar for Douai 852, which was given a new layout that unusually incorporates headings corresponding to Chapter List titles for chs 4–6, 8–12, 15, later erased.

⁶⁸ Only three extant manuscript copies give chapter headings in this part of the *Vita* narrative: N, E₁ and (in the margins) D; their chapter headings for chs 26 and 27 correspond closely in wording. D throughout has many more of the chapter headings than in other manuscripts. Guthlac travels from Repton down to the fens where he arrives in Crowland on St Bartholomew’s day, henceforth his patron saint. (Only the Douai 852 text (f. 12v/7) reads *die octaua kalendarum septem[b]rium* with ‘ix’ above *octaua*, i.e. August 24; Rebecca Rushforth, *Saints in English Kalendars before A.D. 1100*, Henry Bradshaw Society 117 (Woodbridge, 2008), table VIII, shows that nineteen out of twenty-seven calendars give August 25 as St Bartholomew’s feast day but three give August 24.) And just as earlier Guthlac had taken care to say farewell to his companions in arms, he goes back to Repton (ch. 26) to say farewells to the brethren there, returning to Crowland after three months ‘as if to a home inherited from his ancestors’ (ch. 26). The return to Crowland is to the hermitage site found on St Bartholomew’s day. Read without interruption, the narrative does not contain two feast days for St Bartholomew; compare Jane Roberts, ‘Guthlac A, B, and C?’, *Medium Ævum* 42 (1973), 43–46.

⁶⁹ See Colgrave, *Felix’s Life*, p. 181; also Alan Thacker, ‘Guthlac and His Life: Felix Shapes the Saint’, in *Guthlac: Crowland’s Saint*, ed. Roberts and Thacker, pp. 1–24 (pp. 20–22).

⁷⁰ Preliminary paper given in June 2025 (‘The Latin Text behind the Old English Life of St Guthlac’, 97th Annual Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan [University of Tokyo, 1 June 2025]).

skins', the proper garb of a desert saint.⁷¹ Although the following chapters (29–33) resemble the Lives of Anthony and Fursey in phrasing, the three sources of temptation are presented in an orderly fashion. First, despair: three days of deep despair climax with the singing of the psalm “‘In my affliction I called upon the Lord”, etc.’ when, as if in prophecy, St Bartholomew appears, assuring him of help. The second temptation, to undertake hubristic fasting, is defeated by Guthlac’s taking hold of a scrap of barley bread and starting to eat his daily food. In the third temptation, as Guthlac prays at night, repulsive demons invade his cell, drag him through black bog waters and dense brambles and thorns, flog him, and, gathering into a troop, they take him to the gates of hell where his resistance is rewarded by the appearance of St Bartholomew, bathed in heavenly light, who commands the demons to ferry Guthlac home gently in words reminiscent of soul and body narratives. In the morning two demons admit their defeat and inability to torment him any longer.

The group of representative miracle stories (chs 34–49) is positioned between the temptation sequence and the death chapters. The first of these, the episode most widely cited from the Life, is dated at its outset to the reign of Coenred (*r.* 704–709). Felix presents the Britons as aggressors: ‘the Britons, mortal enemies of the Saxon race, were harrying the people of the Angles in warfare, plunder and widespread devastation’; but as Whitelock observes,⁷² ‘The Saxons could have been the aggressors, seeking to expand their territories westwards.’ Guthlac, wakened from drowsiness at prayer by seeming clamour, goes outside; he sees the buildings ablaze and demons lift him on spear-points up into the heavens, but they are put to flight as he chants the opening of Psalm 67, *Exurgat Deus* (“‘Let God arise”, etc.).⁷³ The incidental information that Guthlac recognized their Brittonic language because he had been exiled among them ‘for long enough to have the knack of understanding their strident ways of speech’ is responsible for what Dorothy Whitelock termed ‘a strangely pertinacious error which interprets the Welsh-speaking devils [...] as evidence for the survival of an enclave of Britons in

⁷¹ Compare the Life of Anthony, ch. 47; Paul’s woven palm-leaves (ch. 12) are hardly an option. See Carolinne White, trans., *Early Christian Lives*, Penguin Classics (London, 1998), pp. 38 and 85 respectively.

⁷² *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock and others (London, 1961), p. 26.

⁷³ Nor is there in ch. 36, when again he repels demon attackers.

the fens.⁷⁴ The protective power of the verse sung by Guthlac when confronting these demons has, since the discovery of the Staffordshire hoard (fig. 7), gained Guthlac widespread publicity.

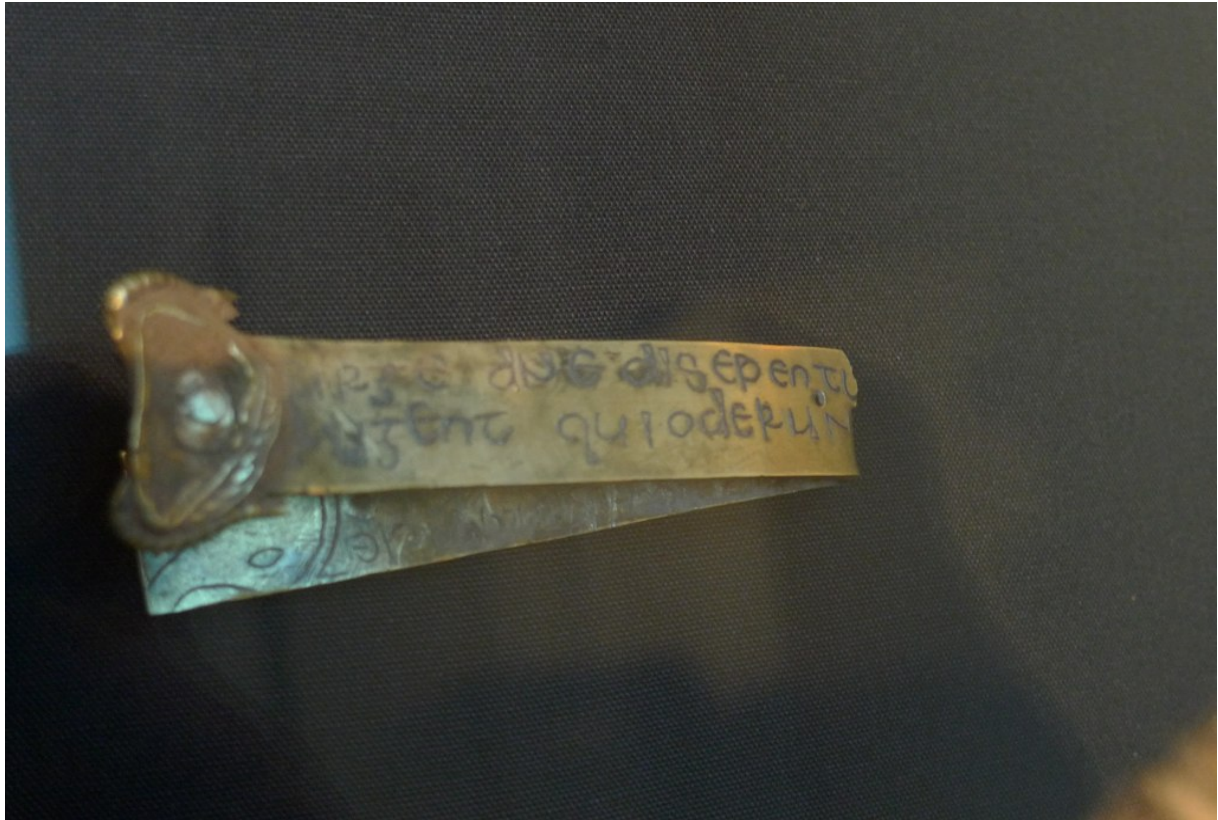


Fig. 7: Staffordshire Hoard, gold strip with Latin inscription. Jon Callas from San Jose, USA, CC BY 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons

In a footnote in his edition of the *Life of Guthlac* Colgrave states: ‘Dr Whitelock suggests that Guthlac’s exile might, like Æthelbald’s, be connected with his royal descent and the fear of the reigning houses that he might strive for the throne.’ I’ve not tracked this view down in any of her publications, but it foreshadows legends invented by modern historians. There’s Guthlac, an exile who enters religion under duress because involved in Mercian troubles when Queen Osthryth was murdered, with Beccel drawn in from the following chapter as an ‘attendant responsible for cutting Guthlac’s hair’, thus ‘keeping him tonsured and so politically paralysed’.⁷⁵ Or Beccel’s attempt to kill Guthlac is ‘to take revenge on a reginacide’, and Abbess Ælfhryth takes into Repton ‘a man wanted for the murder of Cenred’s aunt’.⁷⁶ In one scenario Guthlac makes a failed bid for the kingship of Mercia.⁷⁷ But all this is forgetting that Beccel chose to serve Guthlac ‘of his own free will’ and was subsequently tempted to murder him. The chapter centred on Beccel does have an analogue in Gregory’s *Dialogues*, in Florentius’s

⁷⁴ Whitelock, Review of Colgrave, *The Earliest Saints’ Lives*, 119.

⁷⁵ George Henderson, *Vision and Image in Early Christian England* (New York, 1999), p. 216. Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, bk 5, ch. 24 (Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1969; repr. with corrections, 1991), p. 534), dates Osthryth’s murder to 797.

⁷⁶ Barbara Yorke, ‘Æthelbald, Offa and the Patronage of Nunneries’, in *Æthelbald and Offa. Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia: Papers from a Conference Held in Manchester in 2000*, Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies, ed. David Hill and Margaret Worthington, BAR British Series 383 (Oxford, 2005), pp. 43–48.

⁷⁷ Morn Capper, ‘St Guthlac and the ‘Britons’: A Mercian Context’, in *Guthlac: Crowlands’s Saint*, ed. Roberts and Thacker, pp. 181–213, at p. 196.

attempt to poison Benedict, but any resemblances are of a general sort and no phrases are identified as borrowed. More prosaically, there is tenuous evidence for Guthlac's presence in the circle of King Ethelred in the 690s, provided by his possible witnessing of two charters.⁷⁸

Chapters 37–40 present a Crowland where birds and fish 'even used to eat food from his hand', where Guthlac lives in harmony with its natural creatures. Swallows perch on his shoulders. A jackdaw makes off with a piece of parchment one visitor had filled with writing, but Guthlac gives directions as to how it will be found resting on a reed. Wilfrid's mislaid gloves, snatched up by jackdaws, are, as Guthlac foretells, safely retrieved. There are three healing miracles: Hwætred, a young East Anglian nobleman is healed by exsufflation (ch. 41);⁷⁹ Ecga, one of Æthelbald's thanes, of madness by putting Guthlac's girdle around his waist (ch. 42; Harley Roll, roundel X); and Offa (ch. 45), another of Æthelbald's companions, of a life-threatening reaction to a thorn that had broken through joints in his foot—later, when Æthelbald was king of Mercia, Offa witnessed several charters.⁸⁰ Neighbouring monastic life comes under scrutiny in two stories: in one, two young men from a visiting abbot's household seize an opportunity to consort with a widow, get drunk and loll around in luxury (ch. 43); in the other, two monks on their way to visit Guthlac hide flasks of beer 'to ease their journey' home (ch. 44). I wonder if the *Guthlac A* poet had these chapters in mind when he excused the lax behaviour of young monks (ll. 412–20, 488–512)?

Three stories in which Guthlac's prophetic foresight is displayed complete the sequence of miracles. The first focuses on Wigfrith, among the companions of Bishop Headda on his visit to Crowland. The story, without identified borrowings from earlier sources, is inappropriately divided into two chapters according to the chapter list.⁸¹ As the men ride along together, chatting, Wigfrith voices suspicions of the holy man famed for his prophetic powers, miracles and austere way of life. Self-importantly he proclaims he'll be able to judge whether Guthlac is a fraud because he had lived among the Irish and was experienced in sussing out 'false hermits'. (Many of the early churchmen of the Mercians, the Middle Angles and the East Anglians were Irish, or, like Chad, the first bishop of Lichfield, had Irish training, as Wigfrith had had.) But as Headda and Guthlac talk together, Headda, impressed, suddenly asks Guthlac if he is willing to receive ordination from him (Harley Y. 6, roundel XI). So his church is consecrated and he is ordained, five days before St Bartholomew's day. At Headda's request, Guthlac joins in a celebratory feast. As they eat, noticing Wigfrith seated a little way away, Guthlac asks: 'O brother Wigfrith, what do you think now of the cleric you promised yesterday to judge?' Amazement all around. Felix and his audience knew who Headda was, so there was no need to identify him more closely. He would have been Headda of Lichfield,⁸² but later traditions misidentify him as the contemporary bishop of Winchester of the same name.

In chapter 48 an abbess named Ecgburh,⁸³ daughter of Aldwulf of East Anglia (r. 664–713) and therefore King Ælfwald's sister, wants to know who is to succeed Guthlac at Crowland. Felix had no need to tell his audience where Ecgburh was based but, given that Guthlac had spent two years at Repton before becoming a hermit, Repton is often assumed. The earliest such identification is in the late twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis*, where the daughter of Aldwulf of

⁷⁸ S76 and S77; see *Kemble: The Anglo-Saxon Charters Website* <<https://dk.robinson.cam.ac.uk/>>.

⁷⁹ Discussed by Tom Lynch, 'Ritual in Felix's Life of Guthlac', in *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, ed. Roberts and Thacker, 86–96 at pp. 90–91). For the 'foul thing' on his shoulder, cf. Caligula A. xiv, f. 26 (see p. 4 above).

⁸⁰ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 303, using an early form 'Oba'.

⁸¹ Chapters 46–47: only D places a title at the head of chapter 47; C₁ gives a paragraph initial to mark a division.

⁸² More likely to have been the local diocesan bishop, Headda bishop of Lichfield from 691 and of Leicester from 709; died between the years 716–27, rather than the contemporary bishop of Winchester.

⁸³ Lina Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism* (Cambridge, 1896), p. 126, suggests she was the author of a letter (no. T13, c. 716–18) in the Boniface correspondence.

East Anglia is misnamed Ædburg.⁸⁴ Although Ecgburh's questions resemble questions in chapter 24 of Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, with even some close correspondences in phrasing, they are apposite now Guthlac was a priest in charge of a consecrated church. The chapter ends neatly with the naming of 'Cissa himself, who now in our days occupies the seat of the man of God Guthlac'.

Æthelbald first comes directly into focus in chapter 49, in which Guthlac prophesies that he will become king of Mercia. Æthelbald often visited Crowland, seeking advice and comfort. The Harley Roll shows him conferring with Guthlac, anachronistically with a *fleur-de-lys* crown (roundel XII).⁸⁵ Some of the earlier miracle stories were about Æthelbald's companions (this was an age when those in monastic life 'could have very exalted contacts [...] and much of what is known about the high nobility comes from the hagiographical record of such contacts'),⁸⁶ Wilfrid, when jackdaws stole his gloves (ch. 40) and Ecga and Offa, identified by their friendship with Æthelbald (healed in chs 42 and 45 respectively). Now Felix tells us that the exiled prince was relentlessly persecuted by King Ceolred (*r.* 709–16). Guthlac prophesies that he will receive the kingdom 'from the hand of the Lord. Lie in wait for him whose days have run out, for the hand of the Lord bears down upon him whose hope is placed in the Evil One. And his days will pass away like a shadow'—a prophecy that, we are told at the end of the chapter, 'the present outcome of the present state of affairs confirms'.⁸⁷

The long chapter 50 and three final chapters complete the *Life*. Fifteen years after his arrival at Crowland, the onset of Guthlac's illness, four days before Easter, is sudden. Felix states that his account is written down from the account given by Beccel. Despite the presence in this chapter of close correspondences in phrasing with Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, the two deaths differ strikingly. Guthlac, a full-time hermit like Paul and Anthony, dies with only one other person present, whereas the concerns of nearby Lindisfarne monastery and its brethren clutter Bishop Cuthbert's last days in his retreat in the island of Farne—there is even a miracle, Cuthbert's touch heals an aged monk's diarrhoea. Felix's tight narrative moves steadily from the first day of illness to the fourth, Easter Day, when the Eucharist is celebrated and Guthlac preaches with a depth of knowledge unparalleled in Beccel's experience, and finally to the seventh, when Guthlac gives last instructions to Beccel and explains about his angel of consolation. At sunrise on the eighth day, Guthlac shares communion before dying.

⁸⁴ See David N. Dumville, 'The Anglian collection of royal genealogies and regnal lists', *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976), 31, 33, 37, where Ælfwald is 'Alduulfing' or 'Aldwulfing' (son of Alfwulf).

⁸⁵ Æthelbald is described four times as *exul* (chs 40, 42, 49, 52) and once as *rex* in Felix's present day (ch. 51).

⁸⁶ Campbell, 'Elements in the Background', p. 10.

⁸⁷ No specific phrases show influences or resonances in chs 35, 40, 41, 42, 46, 47.



Fig. 8: Harley Roll Y. 6, roundel XV. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

In the closing sentences Beccel takes news to Pege (fig. 8);⁸⁸ they return to Crowland next day, and Guthlac is buried on the third day. (We learn only incidentally that Guthlac had a sister named Pege and a hermit friend named Ecgberht.) The body, exhumed a year later by Pege in the presence of monks, priests and others in orders (ch. 50), is incorrupt. (Cuthbert, implicitly compared, was exhumed and also found incorrupt, but eleven years after death.) The body is not replaced in a coffin in the earth (fig. 9) but translated to 'a monument that we now gaze upon, erected with its wonderful structures and embellishments in celebration of his prophetic

⁸⁸ The irreverent feather and spectacles are not original.

power by King Æthelbald. There the victorious body of the great man rests in blessedness up to the present course of time.'



Fig. 9: Harley Roll Y. 6, roundel 16. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

The closing chapter recounts one of many posthumous miracles: a man's sight is restored by contact with salt Guthlac had consecrated.

When Felix wrote, the shrine Æthelbald enriched stood as a memorial to Guthlac and the miracles he worked, and it was in Felix's mind as he shaped the *Life*. Corpus 307, f. 52r, records a second inscription, eighteen lines long, related to the shrine. Whereas the *EADWALDUS* poem sits tidily on f. 52r/18–52v/1–3, the second acrostic inscription is less successfully handled (f. 52v/4–18). Its opening three lines look as if the scribe expected them to match the book-poem and they require emendation, as discussed in Appendix 3 of the

forthcoming edition. For now, I look to the part that declares ‘This tomb enfolds the sacred limbs handsomely’, memorializing the fifteen years spent by Guthlac ‘in this place’:

V enientem dominus dono ditabit honoris magn	o :
D eguit hic dignus hoc loco annos octo et septe	m :
L aboris sancti premium iudicat auctor uita	e :
A ulam hanc atque nos gud uideat placido uult	u :
C uius nos credimus opitulat[o]s precibus almi	s :

[The Lord will enrich him when he comes [to judgement] with the great gift of glory. This worthy man spent eight and seven years in this place. The Author of Life assesses the reward of his holy toil. May Guthlac, who we believe has assisted us by his nourishing prayers, look upon this vault and upon us with serene countenance.]

Felix was writing after the shrine had been enriched, at a time when the prosperity of Mercia was ‘growing from day to day’ (ch. 52) under Æthelbald’s rule. Ælfwald had come to power in 713, shortly before Guthlac’s death, and three years later Æthelbald became king of Mercia. Crowland lay where their territories converged in the fens, a haunt of outcasts and the rebellious across centuries. Boundaries shifted or were uncertain,⁸⁹ and across time the areas settled by the Gyrwe, i.e. the people who settled in the fens, were absorbed into fluid groupings. Whitelock points out that: ‘By the early eighth century, Crowland was in the diocese of the Middle Angles, who came under Mercian control in the mid seventh century; but it is likely that previously the Gyrwe were subordinate to East Anglia.’⁹⁰ It is logical therefore to assume with Colgrave that at least part of Æthelbald’s period of exile when Ceolred was king of Mercia was spent in East Anglia.⁹¹ Access to the borderlands of the fens, safely at the edge of Ceolred’s kingdom, would have been easy for the exile. After the deaths of Ine of Wessex (725) and Wihtried of Kent (726), Æthelbald’s power grew south of the Humber, and in time the exile who had taken over the kingdom held by the tyrannical Ceolred would himself be seen as a licentious tyrant. In the second half of the eighth century the kingdom of the East Angles had fallen under Mercian control, and after Ælfwald’s reign few East Anglian kings are named in historical records.⁹²

There are many contradictory interpretations of just why a work commissioned by an East Anglian king should give so much attention to a Mercian king. The Maurists even give the erroneous title ‘Prologus ad regem Ethelbaldus’ in their edition, a title repeated by the Bollandists, who equate Ælfwald with Æthelbald.⁹³ Guthlac was of Mercian descent, born among the Middle Angles. The main stages of his life are anchored to the reigns of three successive Mercian kings and he prophesies that Æthelbald will become the next king. Wilfrid, one of Felix’s two named informants, is a frequent visitor to Crowland, sometimes at the same time as Æthelbald, another frequent visitor. The miracles reported are therefore preponderantly about Mercians, with only two healings specifically of people from further

⁸⁹ See Morn Capper, ‘Treaties, Frontiers and Borderlands: The Making and Unmaking of Mercian Border Traditions’, *Offa’s Dyke Journal* 5 (2023), 208–38 (esp. pp. 211–12).

⁹⁰ Dorothy Whitelock, ‘The Pre-Viking Age Church in East Anglia’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 1 (1972), 1–22, at p. 7.

⁹¹ Colgrave, *Felix’s Life*, p. 16. Cf. Lisa M. C. Weston, ‘Guthlac Betwixt and Between: Literacy, Cross-Temporal Affiliation, and an Anglo-Saxon Anchorite’, *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 42.1 (2016), 1–27, at p. 4, arguing ‘It is, therefore, distinctly possible that Felix was a monk in Ecgburga’s charge and his Guthlac was a means of promoting institutional influence.’

⁹² Simon Keynes, ‘Rulers of the English, c. 450–1066’, in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia*, ed. Michael Lapidge and others, pp. 521–38, at p. 530.

⁹³ Not the addressee in any MS.

afield—Hwætred, the East Anglian nobleman (see fig. 5, p. 8) healed by exsufflation (the sample miracle in Harley Roll's final drawing) and, if I am right about the Wissa *provincia*,⁹⁴ the West Saxon *paterfamilias* of the closing posthumous miracle. We know nothing of marriage relationships that might have allied Ælfwald and Æthelwald—so, as Colgrave argued long ago: 'Might not this shrine serve as a link between the two rulers and the two lands, a spiritual bond and a sign of perpetual friendship?'⁹⁵

Disruption came in the 870s with the Vikings' sweep through Mercia into East Anglia, as a result of which the period 869–970 was, in Whitelock's words, 'one of the darkest in the history of the eastern counties.'⁹⁶ Of the early shrine once at Crowland no traces are identifiable,⁹⁷ but the inscriptions by chance recorded in a tenth-century Worcester manuscript enhance our understanding of the period in which Felix's Life of Guthlac was commissioned, not by King Æthelbald who in gratitude enriched the tomb in which Guthlac's bones lay,⁹⁸ but by the neighbouring King Ælfwald of East Anglia, whose purpose could have been for it to furnish the shrine's altar.

Felix, and Wilfrid, Cissa, Æthelbald and Ælfwald, lived in an age of miracles, an age when (I cite Whitelock's *The Audience of Beowulf*), people were ready to accept that the fens were peopled with monsters and demons.⁹⁹ We seek for details that to us seem trustworthy, but we should not lose sight of the beliefs they held.

⁹⁴ Generally interpreted as people living by the river Wissey.

⁹⁵ Colgrave, *The Earliest Saints' Lives*, p. 55.

⁹⁶ Dorothy Whitelock, 'The Conversion of the Eastern Danelaw', *Saga-Book* 12 (1937–45), 159–76, at p. 159.

⁹⁷ Duncan W. Wright and Hugh Willmott, 'Sacred Landscapes and Deep Time: Mobility, Memory, and Monasticism on Crowland', *Journal of Field Archaeology* 49.4 (2024), 280–99.

⁹⁸ See Roberts and Ishiguro, *Felix's Life of St Guthlac*, p. 103; Appendix 3: *CALDUG*, l. 10, 'Tumulus iste pulchre sacrata membra includi'.

⁹⁹ Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951; repr. with corrections, 1958), pp. 75–76.