To my wife and family
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Felix, who authored the *Life of Saint Guthlac* in Anglo-Saxon England sometime around 730, described Guthlac establishing a hermitage on a plundered burial mound. I argue two basic things about this passage. First, this is a positive image of a mound, as indicated especially by the way that Felix structured his text around the passage. Such a positive use of a mound can best be explained through a brief excursus into earlier Anglo-Saxon practices. This brings me to my second point. Felix also provided indicators throughout the text that these practices were changing. This passage was therefore ripe for reinterpretations unanticipated by Felix. Although the actual process of reinterpretation is beyond the scope of the present discussion, it is appropriate to note that later practices attached a negative connotation to mounds, and this negative image of mounds has pervaded much of the scholarship written on the *Life of Saint Guthlac*. 
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

So to begin to write about the solitary life of St. Guthlac, as I have proposed to do, I will take care to narrate those same things that I heard from his frequent visitors Wilfrid and Cissa, and in the same order in which I learned them. There was then on the said island a mound built of clods of earth which visitors to the solitude, greedy for acquiring profit there, had broken open. In the side of it there seemed to be a sort of a cistern, and in this, Guthlac the man of blessed memory began to dwell, building a hut over it.¹

This description comes from the Life of Saint Guthlac, a text written around 730 CE by an otherwise unknown author who called himself Felix. The text survives in thirteen manuscripts, and it inspired an extensive subsequent literature in both Latin and the Anglo-Saxon vernacular.² It narrates the life of Guthlac, an Anglo-Saxon nobleman who gave up his youth as a warrior to enter a monastery. After two years learning monastic discipline, he left the community to establish himself as a wonder-working hermit on an island called Crowland in the swampy Fens of eastern England. The landscape of eastern England has changed substantially since the events of the text, which took place sometime in the decades around 700 CE. After centuries of continuous occupation, agricultural and industrial transformation, and environmental change, the

¹ Igitur ut de sancti Guthlaci solitaria vita, sicut proposui, scribere exordiar, quae a frequentatoribus eius Wilfrido et Cissan audivi, eodem ordine, quo conperi, easdem res narrare curabo. Erat itaque in praedicta insula tumulus agrestibus glaebis coacervatus, quem olim avari solitudinis frequentatores lucri ergo illic adquirendi defodientes scindebant, in cuius latere velut cisterna inesse videbatur; in qua vir beatæ memoriae Guthlac desuper inposito tugurio habitare coepit. Felix, Vita Guthlaci, c. 28, ed. B. Colgrave, Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac (Cambridge, 1956) [hereafter VG]. To regularize word choice and facilitate comparison between texts, all translations are my own.

very site of Guthlac’s dwelling is now a matter of conjecture. All that remains of his mound of built earth is this relatively short passage preserved in his *Life*.

Nevertheless, this passage has provided sufficient material for speculative interpretations of what may have constituted Guthlac’s mound. Audrey Meaney, while assessing the historicity of the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, has reviewed the possibilities as to what kind of structure the text may have referred and noted problems with each.

Guthlac’s mound may have been a Neolithic barrow, many of which have been found in Britain with chambers built of timber or stone. However, the Fens provide no stone with which the Neolithic peoples could have built a cist, and a timber cist from the Neolithic Age would have decayed and collapsed well before the Anglo-Saxon period. If Guthlac’s mound were a Bronze Age round barrow, it would have lacked both cist and treasure. Such a Bronze Age mound might have been disturbed by treasure hunters...

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3 Perhaps the most significant change to the landscape was the medieval reclamation of marshland, which would have transformed the uncultivated and uninhabited wilderness described by Felix into the patchwork of fields and rural towns, which have dominated the landscape of eastern England ever since. For a survey of changes to the landscape of Lincolnshire, with particular attention to evidence for land reclamation in the area of Crowland throughout the Middle Ages, see D. Stocker, “The Early Church in Lincolnshire: A Study of the Sites and Their Significance,” in A. Vince (ed.), *Pre-Viking Lindsey* (Lincoln, 1993), pp. 101-22, at pp. 101-06. Although an abbey dating from the medieval period remains in use in Crowland, it does not claim to be the exact spot of Guthlac’s dwelling due to discontinuity during the Viking Age. Colgrave, *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac*, pp. 182n-184n. See also A. Meaney, “Anglo-Saxon Pagan and Early Christian Attitudes to the Dead,” in M. Carver (ed.), *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300* (Suffolk, 2003), pp. 229-41, at pp. 229-30.


6 Meaney, “Felix’s *Life of St. Guthlac*: Hagiography and/or Truth,” p. 35.

7 Small assemblages, occasionally including exotic items, have been found in Bronze Age mounds in Britain. Woodward, *British Barrows*, pp. 100-22. However, there is no evidence that these mounds were
ignorant of prehistoric burial practices with the mistaken expectation of a richly furnished burial; once they recognized their error, their abandoned robber pit may have left the appearance of a prehistoric cist.\(^8\) Barrows with cists constructed of tiles or wood were also built in Britain during the Roman period, but these rare barrows are found nowhere in the Fens.\(^9\) Felix’s description thus seems most likely to have resembled the Anglo-Saxon barrows of the 6th or 7th century, when mounds were heaped over richly furnished burial chambers throughout Britain. However, no surviving example of this rite has been found in vicinity of Crowland.\(^10\)

Meaney concluded that the difficulty of matching Guthlac’s mound to any of these archaeological types may be the result of inaccuracies within the text: the mound may never have been used as a repository for treasure, and the word “cistern” may have been an inexact reference.\(^11\) Indeed, even the word used for “mound” is somewhat ambiguous. The Latin word *tumulus* – like its counterparts in the Anglo-Saxon vernacular, *beorg* and *hlaew* – could be used for either natural or manmade mounds of targeted for treasure. In fact, Felix’s *Life of Saint Guthlac* has been cited as the earliest known record of a mound robbery. Colgrave, Felix’s *Life of Saint Guthlac*, p. 183n.

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\(^8\) Meaney, “Felix’s Life of Guthlac: History or Hagiography?” p. 79.

\(^9\) Records of an excavation in 1880 suggest that there may have been at least one Iron-Age burial in the vicinity of Crowland. Stocker, “Early Church in Lincolnshire,” p. 106. However, these records do not suggest a chamber burial, and there is no indication that this was not an isolated grave. The majority of Roman Age burial mounds are nevertheless found in Eastern England. Meaney, “Felix’s Life of Guthlac: History or Hagiography?” p. 79.

\(^10\) An Anglo-Saxon secondary burial furnished with beads datable to the 6th century was found at Eye, five miles from Crowland. Meaney, “Felix’s Life of St. Guthlac: Hagiography and/or Truth,” p. 35. Several other mounds have been found in the vicinity of Crowland, but there is no evidence that any included a chamber burial. Stocker, “Early Church in Lincolnshire,” p. 106.

varying size, and these mounds need not have been associated with burial rites.\textsuperscript{12} Even if the landscape of Crowland had gone unchanged over the past thirteen centuries, the text offers little that could be used to identify Guthlac’s precise mound securely.

Whatever material presence Guthlac’s mound may once have had, that presence is now lost to history. In the \textit{Life of Saint Guthlac}, his mound survives as a textual presence. This surviving presence is a critical fragment of the past for scholars studying Anglo-Saxon England. Between the lavish monumental burials of the late-7th century and the unfurnished churchyard burials that characterize 8th-century England, there is an apparent break in the archaeological record.\textsuperscript{13} Two critical issues are at stake in the mortuary archaeology for this period: an inability to establish a chronology of burials based on assemblages in the period from 650 to 720, and a sudden cessation of furnished burials around 720 that corresponded to a widespread relocation of cemetery sites.\textsuperscript{14} Guthlac’s mound, as preserved in the \textit{Life of Saint Guthlac}, is one of the few traces of Anglo-Saxon relationships with mortuary monuments that allows a critical entry into this period of changing burial rites.


\textsuperscript{13} On the gap between pagan and churchyard burials, see Meaney, “Anglo-Saxon Pagan and Early Christian Attitudes to the Dead,” pp. 236-37, 240-41; J. Moreland, “The Significance of Production in Eighth-Century England,” in J. Moreland (ed.), \textit{Archaeology, Theory and the Middle Ages: Understanding the Early Medieval Past} (London, 2010), pp. 208-54, at p. 219. Most dating has been accomplished by seriation, working from the assumption that similar assemblages imply temporal proximity. Helen Geake has enumerated the difficulties in this and other common dating methods used for this period: occurrence seriation, horizontal stratigraphy, coin-dating, radiocarbon dating, and historical dating. She concluded that the resultant imprecision means that burials from this period may only be dated to within a half century. H. Geake, \textit{The Use of Grave-Goods in Conversion-Period England}, c.600-c.850 (Oxford, 1997), pp. 7-11.

\textsuperscript{14} Geake, \textit{The Use of Grave-Goods}, pp. 18, 123-24, 132-35.
Moreover, these changes in burial practices occurred in conjunction with a period of far-reaching cultural transformations, commonly referred to as the long 8th century.\textsuperscript{15} Studies of the long 8th century typically embrace the years from 680 to 830 CE. Textual sources from this period indicate social, political, cultural, and religious upheavals.\textsuperscript{16} Anglo-Saxon kingdoms consolidated, Christian institutions expanded throughout Britain, urban trading centers emerged around the North Sea basin, and the Anglo-Saxons became increasingly entangled in the expansion of Frankish hegemony.\textsuperscript{17} Material traces of these changes have been found in evidence for changing patterns of subsistence, production, economic exchange, settlement, and burial.\textsuperscript{18}

These changes reflected a fundamental shift in how the Anglo-Saxons perceived and engaged the world around them. The Anglo-Saxons imposed new structures of power upon the landscape to exploit its resources in new and imaginative ways.\textsuperscript{19} Burial rites were an effective mark of these structures upon the landscape, and changing

\textsuperscript{15} This term is most frequently encountered in studies using archaeological evidence. For a recent analysis of these materials, see H. Hamerow, \textit{Early Medieval Settlements: The Archaeology of Rural Communities in Northwest Europe 400-900} (Oxford, 2002), p. 191. She applies this term to the North Sea basin, but with particular attention to changes in England.

\textsuperscript{16} In a recent survey of the Anglo-Saxon period, Robin Fleming discussed various dimensions of the long 8th century in chapters detailing the rise of elites and kingdoms, missionaries and converts, the revival of commerce, encounters with Scandinavians, and the rise of towns. R. Fleming, \textit{Britain after Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400-1070} (London, 2010), pp. 89-240.

\textsuperscript{17} This period also embraces the beginnings of the Viking Age, traditionally dated to the sack of Lindisfarne in 793. These later developments, however, are of lesser relevance for the present discussion.

\textsuperscript{18} Some critical studies used in the present analysis include Hamerow, \textit{Early Medieval Settlements}; Moreland, “The Significance of Production”; and Martin Carver (ed.), \textit{The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe} (Woodbridge, 1992).

burial rites involved holistic structural changes. Thus changes in burial practices were not merely coincidental to broader cultural changes; they were integral to them. Just as importantly, textual references to burial practices also contributed to these changes. As historian and archaeologist John Moreland has argued: “written and artifactual remains from the past were not created with the questions of future archaeologists and historians in mind . . . but were produced, and had efficacy in the production and reproduction of structures of power, in the past itself.”

Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac, then, written in the midst of the long 8th century and commemorating events from its early years, preserves Guthlac’s mound as a rare example of burial practices in this period of broad cultural transformation. Throughout the course of the long 8th century, a significant shift occurred. Burial mounds, which had earlier served as places for ancestral cemeteries and prestigious burials, came to be seen as exclusionary places used for marking boundaries and disposing of outcasts. The archaeologist Martin Carver has argued that, at least in the case of Sutton Hoo, this change was due to a strong association between mound burial and pagan ideology; with the conversion to Christianity, mounds became dangerous and odious symbols remembered from a rejected view of the world.

In the Life of Saint Guthlac, however, Felix gave no indication that this was the case for the Mercian and East Anglian world with which he was familiar. Instead, Felix

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20 On the connection between burial practices and settlement patterns, see Moreland, “The Significance of Production,” pp. 218-19. On the connection between burial practices, the movement toward political consolidation, assertions of national identity, and ecclesiastical expansion, see Geake, Use of Grave Goods, pp. 126, 135-36.


deliberately used Guthlac’s mound as a place that communicated importance, as indicated by its key role in the text. This use suggests strong continuities with pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon practices. However, Felix also imagined the landscape in terms of stable patterns of occupation based on the ownership of bounded plots of land. Thus Felix’s *Life of Saint Guthlac* preserves two distinct modes of engaging the landscape during the early years of transition in burial and settlement patterns. Ultimately, the text reveals that the changing cultural value of mounds cannot be reduced to the revaluation of pagan symbols necessitated by the acceptance of Christianity. Felix placed these two systems of thought side-by-side in the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, and he used them together in his effort to present Guthlac as a saint. Only after pre-Christian practices of organizing the landscape had been abandoned and thoroughly forgotten could Guthlac’s mound take on a role in the Christian cosmology as a place occupied by demons. Felix, by holding both systems of landscape organization in tension around the focal point of Guthlac’s mound, produced the possibility for this reading, but the structure of the text indicates that for Felix, mounds were not dangerous places.

23 Pre-Christian here indicates practices that had not been affected by the Christianity introduced by the Augustinian mission. Ian Wood has argued that Anglo-Saxon and Frisian pagan practices prior to the Augustinian mission were influenced by memories of Christian practices during the Roman period. I. Wood, “Some Historical Re-Identifications and the Christianization of Kent,” in G. Armstrong and I. Wood (eds.), *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals* (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 27-35, at pp. 30-31. Common cultural values may have eased some aspects of Christianization, but pagan practices already adapted to Christian values would have been especially difficult to identify and eradicate. The use of burial mounds as symbols of ancestral presence may have been one such practice.
CHAPTER 2
THE TEXTUALITY AND MATERIALITY OF BURIAL MOUNDS IN THE LIFE OF SAINT GUTHLAC

The Hagiographic Structure of the Life of Saint Guthlac

From the outset, it should be noted that Felix did not write the Life of Saint Guthlac with the purposes of modern historians in mind. Before Felix’s use of the mound can be explored, the historical context of the Life of Saint Guthlac must first be understood. The Life of Saint Guthlac, like any historical text, was written in response to a particular set of circumstances and was intended to achieve a particular set of purposes. The prologue to the Life of Saint Guthlac provides indicators for some of this basic context. In the prologue, Felix identified himself, his purposes for writing, his subject, his narrative structure, and the priorities that informed his authorial choices for the text. Each of these passages, however, echoes or directly borrows from earlier texts. Felix used these passages drawn from earlier texts not only to express his identity and to describe his text; he also used them to establish relationships between the Life of Saint Guthlac and a surrounding body of literature. Since this is the basic context that Felix envisioned for the Life of Saint Guthlac, it must first be explored before approaching his use of mounds and how his textual references intersected with the ways mounds were used in other contexts.¹

The author identified himself at the outset as “Felix, a servant of a Catholic community.”² Although Felix declined to describe himself further, he apparently

¹ In the Bollandist tradition of scholarship, hagiographies are read against the grain in an attempt to discern authentic historical facts. Olsen, however, has argued that hagiography should first be approached with respect to its literary purpose and value, that is, along its intended grain. This provides the best context for understanding what a text is doing. A.H. Olsen, “‘De Historiis Sanctorum’: A Generic Study of Hagiography,” Genre 13 (1980), pp. 407-29, at pp. 407-12, 424-25.

² Felix catholicae congregationis vernaculus. VG, prologue.
borrowed the phrase from Aldhelm (c. 639-709), the prolific West Saxon abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne. Aldhelm had used this same phrase to describe himself in the dedication for a text he had written entitled *On Meters and Riddles, and the Rule of Feet.* Throughout the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, Felix regularly borrowed from Aldhelm’s writings, and he seems to have imitated Aldhelm’s style as well. Modern scholars have critiqued this style as an “ornate and bombastic” dialect of Latin typical in Anglo-Saxon England, but its use in the *Life of Saint Guthlac* also indicates that Felix adapted his style to meet the expectations of this literary circle. This brief self-description therefore does not merely indicate that Felix was a member of an unspecified Christian community. More positively, it indicates that Felix asserted his membership in an Anglo-Latin community of readers and writers who admired and imitated the style of Aldhelm.

Felix claimed that he was contributing to this literary community at the behest of Ælfwald, who ruled the kingdom of East Anglia from 713 to 749. Felix continued:

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3 Colgrave, introduction to *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac*, p. 15.

4 Aldhelm, *De metris et enigmatis ac pedum regulis*, in R. Ehwald (ed.), *Aldhelmi Opera, Auctores Antiquissimi* 15 (Berlin, 1919), pp. 59-204, at p. 61. This is the sole occurrence of this phrase in the editions of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.

5 Colgrave identified Aldhelm as the primary influence on Felix’s style, although Bede’s influence can also be discerned, especially in the later chapters. Colgrave, introduction to *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac*, pp. 17-18. Felix’s style is discussed in further detail in Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac*,” pp. 67-106.


7 Various proposals have been offered for Felix’s identity. These will be further discussed below.

8 VG, prologue. This claim has been contested. Jane Roberts has suggested that Felix may have dedicated his text to the East Anglian Ælfwald to obscure the pro-Mercian political purposes she perceived in the text. J. Roberts, “Hagiography and Literature: The Case of Guthlac of Crowland,” in M.P.
“Obeying your commands, I have composed the little book you ordered about the life of father Guthlac of blessed memory.”

Although this passage thus situates the text sometime in the first half of the 8th century, it also resonates with at least two earlier texts: Sulpicius Severus’s *Life of Saint Martin* and Bede’s *Life of Saint Cuthbert*. These echoes and verbal borrowings are evident when the texts are placed in parallel:

**Life of Saint Martin** | **Life of Saint Cuthbert** | **Life of Saint Guthlac**
--- | --- | ---
I have written a little book about the life of Saint Martin . . . . | Since, dear friends, you have commanded it, I have composed a book at your request about the life of our father Cuthbert of blessed memory . . . . | Obeying your commands, I have composed the little book you ordered about the life of father Guthlac of blessed memory . . . .

*libellum quem de vita sancti Martini scripserem . . . .* | *Quia iussitis dilectissimi ut libro quem de vita beatae memoriae patris nostri Cuthberti vestro rogatu composui . . . .* | *Iussionibus tuis obtemporans, libellum quem de vita patris beatae memoriae Guthlaci conponi praecepisti . . . .*

This verbal borrowing should not be mistaken the necessary result of a poverty of the Latin language. Alternatives can be found, for example, in Evagrius’s introduction to his translation of Athanasius’s *Life of Saint Antony*. Evagrius began his text thus:

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9 *VG*, prologue. See Latin text below.


12 *VG*, prologue.

13 The passage from the *Life of Saint Guthlac* continues with an elaboration on the trope of humility taken from the preface of the *Life of Saint Martin*, indicating that the choice of *libellum* is not merely coincidental. For a full discussion of the relationship between the two passages, see Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac,*” pp. 47-48.
“Therefore, at your behest, I have translated the life of blessed Antony.” Instead of following the Evagrian model or devising a new introductory formula, Felix borrowed deliberately from the *Life of Saint Martin* and the *Life of Saint Cuthbert*. By doing so, he communicated at least two distinct priorities for his text.

First, Felix asserted that the *Life of Saint Guthlac* was comparable to the *Life of Saint Martin*, a widely circulated text that proclaimed itself to be a little book humbly written about the life of a saint. The *Life of Saint Martin*, as quoted by Felix, was written by Sulpicius Severus shortly before the death of Martin, who was bishop of Tours in the mid-4th century. By the 8th century, this text was popular in both Frankish Gaul and Ireland, and substantial excerpts from it had been integrated into the anonymous *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, written in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria between 699 and 705. Bede, intending to supersede this anonymous *life* and reject its promotion of certain Irish ecclesiastical practices, wrote his prose *Life of Saint Cuthbert* no later than 721. He may likewise have rejected the *Life of Saint Martin* as an inappropriate source if he associated it with Irish influence. Thus despite the strong influence of the

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16 Colgrave, introduction to *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, p. 13.

17 Catherine Cubitt has argued that a comparison of the two *lives* of Cuthbert "emphasizes the deep rift within the Northumbrian Church caused by the rejection of the Irish Easter reckoning and other ecclesiastical practices. C. Cubitt, "Memory and Narrative in the Cult of Early Anglo-Saxon Saints," in Y. Hen and M. Innes (eds.), *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 29-66, at pp. 30, 39-46.

18 Colgrave, introduction to *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, p. 16.

19 The *Life of Saint Martin* was popular in Ireland, but it need not have arrived to Northumbria through Irish hands. Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, p. 80. Alternately, Benedict Biscop (d. 689) and his successor
*Life of Saint Martin* on the anonymous *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, influences from the *Life of Saint Martin* were scrupulously purged from Bede’s *Life of Saint Cuthbert* and are also absent from his other writings.²⁰ Felix, by joining a passage from the *Life of Saint Martin* with a passage from Bede’s *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, may have sought to repair this breach and revive the presence of the *Life of Saint Martin* in the Anglo-Latin community.²¹ Regardless of whether he anticipated renewed interest in the *Life of Saint Martin* itself, Felix certainly saw his text as borrowing from it and reviving its influence in the Anglo-Latin community.

Second, by borrowing from Bede’s *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, Felix asserted that Guthlac and Cuthbert both shared a textual identity as a “father of blessed memory.”²² This was an ambivalent comparison: it implied both that Guthlac’s career mirrored Cuthbert’s and also that Felix’s narrative mirrored Bede’s. This suggests that Felix may have intended the *Life of Saint Guthlac* to supersede not only Sulpicious Severus’ *Life of Saint Martin* but possibly Bede’s *Life of Saint Cuthbert* as well. Readers finding echoes of the lives of Martin and Cuthbert in the *Life of Saint Guthlac* may have perceived that Martin and Cuthbert had both prefigured Guthlac. By ascribing the

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²⁰ Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, p. 76.

²¹ Downey has noted that Felix borrowed from the *Life of Saint Martin* only in the prologue and when describing Guthlac’s death in chapter 51, but she argued: “the echoes are lengthy and substantial.” Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac,*” pp. 45-51, at p. 46.

²² VG, prologue. VCP, prologue. Although this was a common phrase in hagiographic texts, Felix surrounded the phrase with borrowings from the *Life of Cuthbert* to emphasize that Guthlac shared this identity specifically with Cuthbert.
attributes of multiple saints to Guthlac, Felix effectively claimed that Guthlac embodied more saintly attributes than had his individual predecessors. Thus by identifying Guthlac as a “father of blessed memory” just like Cuthbert, Felix made an assertive claim for Guthlac’s superiority over the Northumbrian saint. Furthermore, by infusing Guthlac with attributes drawn from Martin as well as Cuthbert, Felix provided Guthlac with an extra dimension of sanctity that Bede seems to have purposefully suppressed in his *Life of Saint Cuthbert*. Although the political background of the *Life of Saint Guthlac* remains uncertain – scholars remain divided on whether Felix worked under East Anglian or Mercian influence,23 and there is no basis to speculate on his relationship to Northumbria – the text can nevertheless be situated in a context of highly competitive saints’ cults.24

In short, Felix submitted his *Life of Saint Guthlac* to a community of critical readers, and he could have anticipated that the *Life of Saint Guthlac* would survive among these readers only if it were capable of appealing to them as a high-quality text. Although scholars have debated the intended audiences of Anglo-Saxon hagiographic texts, these texts on saints’ lives seem to have been primarily directed at an ecclesiastical readership competent in Latin; episodes with non-ecclesiastical elites suggest that some texts – including several in the *Life of Saint Guthlac* – may have been intended to appeal to lay aristocrats as well.25 As Felix borrowed from other texts

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23 For example, Cubitt has written that the *Life of Saint Guthlac* should be understood as a pro-Mercian text, whereas Nicholas Higham interpreted the text as a failed East Anglian attempt to subvert Mercian power. Cubitt, “Memory and Narrative,” pp. 29-66; N.J. Higham, “Guthlac’s *Vita*, Mercia and East Anglia in the First Half of the Eighth Century,” in Hill and Worthington (eds.), *Æthelbald and Offa*, pp. 85-90.

24 Rollason has provided a thorough discussion of this topic a chapter entitled “The Politics of Sainthood.” Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, pp. 105-29.

and integrated them into the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, he therefore offered this Latin-literate and culturally sophisticated audience cues to trigger their awareness of his text’s structure. When Felix identified his text as a “little book” about the life of a saint, he cued his readers to compare his text to the well-known *Life of Saint Martin*, and when Felix identified his subject as a “father of blessed memory,” he cued his readers to compare his text especially to Bede’s recent *Life of Saint Cuthbert*. Felix’s success can be judged in part by his relative influence over subsequent traditions: although both Cuthbert and Guthlac are well represented in Anglo-Saxon calendars and litanies, only Guthlac inspired poetry in the vernacular.\(^{26}\) Felix’s contemporaries thus seem to have valued the *Life of Saint Guthlac* not mainly for its content, much of which was borrowed from earlier texts, but rather for Felix’s skill in structuring the content he borrowed into a coherent and compelling form, capable of meeting the demands of a well-informed and highly-critical audience in a region not well populated by saints.\(^{27}\)

This audience recognized that textual borrowing was a characteristic of the genre of the *Life of Saint Guthlac* and that this could be a method used to achieve specific purposes. Modern historians and literary critics have often classified such texts about the lives of saints under the genre of hagiography despite the extraordinary diversity that such texts display. Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, who asserted the value of hagiography as a literary genre, noted: “Hagiography is a curiously amorphous genre

\(^{26}\) Roberts, “Hagiography and Literature,” p. 82.

\(^{27}\) It should be noted, however, that although Felix’s text itself seems to have been valued for its elaborate and well-crafted structure, later interpretations of the Guthlac traditions – including modern scholarship – have focused more on Guthlac’s particular rather than universal experiences. Subsequent traditions elaborated especially upon Felix’s chapters 28-34, detailing Guthlac’s arrival at the mound, his early temptations of despair and excessive fasting, and the assault of the demonic host. Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac*,” p. 189.
which may be defined only by subject-matter, not by form or style."\textsuperscript{28} Diversity in form and style resulted in part from the diverse purposes that motivated hagiographers. Olsen observed: "Didactic and polemical purpose is such an important part of every hagiographic work that it often influences the author’s choice of subject matter, form, and style."\textsuperscript{29}

To a modern reader concerned with authenticity, the structure of the text may belie this priority. In juxtaposition to his avowed didactic purpose, Felix formulated the *Life of Saint Guthlac* as a straightforward biography commissioned by King Ælfwald of East Anglia. Felix described its structure thus: "Since therefore you have required it of me, I have written for you about the career of Saint Guthlac, how it began, and what it was before his holy vow, and how his life ended."\textsuperscript{30} Although the passage itself seems straightforward and in fact accurately outlines the subsequent narrative, Felix copied this text almost verbatim from the *Life of Saint Antony*. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria wrote this prose biography of the Egyptian hermit Antony in the 4th century, but it was known in Anglo-Saxon England through a Latin translation prepared shortly thereafter by Evagrius of Antioch. The Evagrian *Life of Saint Antony* circulated widely in Anglo-Saxon England, just as it did throughout Latin-speaking Europe.\textsuperscript{31} A comparison between these passages reveals the similarities:

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{Life of Saint Antony} & \textit{Life of Saint Guthlac} \\
Since therefore you [plural] have required & Since therefore you [singular] have \\
\end{tabular}


\textsuperscript{29} Olsen, "A Study of Hagiography," p. 416.

\textsuperscript{30} VG, prologue. See Latin text below.

\textsuperscript{31} Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, pp. 76-77.
it of me, I have written for you – desiring to learn – about the career of blessed Antony, how it began, and what it was before his holy vow, and also how his life ended.

Quoniam igitur exegistis a me, ut uobis scribebam de conversatione beati Antonii, volontibus discere, quemadmodum coeperit, quidue fuerit ante propositum sanctem, qualem etiam habuerit terminum vitae . . . .

Felix could have anticipated that readers of the *Life of Saint Guthlac* would already have been familiar with the popular *Life of Saint Antony*, and he may have expected those readers to recognize this passage. This recognition would have prepared his audience not for a historical record of Guthlac’s career but rather for a variation on the events of Antony’s life, adapted to Felix’s own purposes.

Felix understood his purpose to be the establishment of Guthlac as an Anglo-Saxon model of sanctity:

I considered that this little book should be for this useful purpose: that for those who know, it may be a sign to call them back to the memory of so great a man; and for those who do not know, it may be as an indication to an open path.

Felix’s *Life of Saint Guthlac* thus conforms to the definition of hagiography as a didactic or polemical text taking a saint as its subject. Felix was not primarily concerned with

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32 VA, prologue.

33 VG, prologue.


35 [A]d huius utilitatis commodum hunc codicellum fieri ratus, ut illis qui sciant ad memoriam tanti viri, nota revocandi fiat, his vero, qui ignorant, velut late pansae viae indicium notescat. VG, prologue. Downey found oblique echoes to this passage in the same passage from the prologue of the *Life of Saint Martin* discussed above. She also considered the problem of intertextual reproduction. Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac*,” pp. 23-24, 51.
preserving the historical truth of Guthlac’s biography in a modern sense. Instead, Felix set out to write a text that could establish Guthlac’s sanctity and provide a model of holiness for others to follow. Although this statement somewhat undermines the value of the narrative of the *Life of Saint Guthlac* as a historical record of the past, it calls attention to the fact that Felix intentionally structured his text to achieve a specific historical purpose.

Furthermore, Felix’s stated purpose indicated that he did not consider his text to be a finished work or product. Instead, he conceived of the *Life of Saint Guthlac* as an open-ended text that could both inform the behavior of its readers and provide source material for later hagiographers. Felix therefore situated himself in a tradition of writing that did not treat texts as finished products but rather as part of an ongoing process of textual reproduction.  

He concluded his introduction thus: “But so that the story of such a man of so great a name could be completed, . . . I have arranged the text of the present document as best I could, leaving the greater part to authors of greater knowledge.” Thus, as Felix understood and presented the text, the *Life of Saint Guthlac* had a purpose of its own and was an active participant in the production of historical change.

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37 *Sed ut tanti viri tanti nominis relatio conpleatur, . . . textum prae sentis cartulae, prout potui, digessi, maioris scientiae autoribus maiorem partem linquens . . . .* VG, prologue. It is worth noting that modern analogies of these open-ended texts include wikis and internet memes. In both cases, preexisting material is appropriated and its content is edited. The most successful of these wiki entries or memes undergo the greatest extent of revision and reproduction.
Felix, in this passage, fulfilled the topos of humility that hearkened back to the earlier characterization of his text as a “little book” like that of the *Life of Saint Martin*;\(^{38}\) however, he also expressed a conscious anticipation that, just as he was attempting to supersede earlier saints’ lives, so too would his saint’s life one day be superseded. Indeed, Felix, who may have borrowed all Guthlac’s miracles from earlier sources,\(^{39}\) certainly needed no one to tell him that later hagiographers would borrow from his text as well. In a way, this secondary borrowing would serve to legitimize the sanctity of Guthlac, since by attributing Guthlac’s miracles to later saints, subsequent hagiographers would implicitly acknowledge the sanctity of the miracles Felix ascribed to Guthlac.\(^ {40}\) The textual content of the *Life of Saint Guthlac* was therefore borrowed from – and borrowable for – other hagiographic texts. Given this open-ended genre, the unique structure that Felix provided for that content was the primary means available to distinguish the particularity of the *Life of Saint Guthlac* as a unique text. Felix relied upon his ability to produce a compelling structure that could ensure the success of his text and the cult it promoted. For Felix, therefore, what mattered most was the unique structure, which he used to create both the coherency of its contents and intertextual connections established by borrowing from other texts.

Thus in the prologue, Felix established expectations for the rest of the text by borrowing from other texts and structuring them in meaningful ways. In the course of the

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\(^{38}\) Downey argued that this was an intentional echo of the Evagrian text. Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac*,” pp. 47-48.

\(^{39}\) As alleged by Meaney. Meaney, “Felix’s *Life of Guthlac*: History or Hagiography?” p. 77.

\(^{40}\) Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac*,” p. 189. Perhaps the clearest example is the hand of God motif, where a saint is signaled at birth by the appearance of a heavenly hand. The *Life of Saint Guthlac* is the earliest known source of this motif. Roberts, “Hagiography and Literature,” p. 73. Meaney’s allegation that all Guthlac’s miracles were borrowed did not apparently extend to the appearance of the hand of God, since she was only considering miracles effected by Guthlac himself.
prologue, Felix borrowed passages verbatim from Bede’s prose and metric versions of the *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, Pope Gregory the Great’s *Exegesis of Job* and *Letter to Leander*, Sulpicius Severus’ *Life of Saint Martin*, Evagrius’ translation of Athanasius’ *Life of Saint Antony*, Paul of Tarsus’s *Letter to the Romans*, and the *Psalms*. Further borrowings have been identified throughout the *Life of Saint Guthlac*. Throughout the narrative, Felix borrowed especially from the Evagrian *Life of Saint Antony*, the *Life of Saint Paul the Hermit* by Jerome, the *Life of Saint Martin*, the *Life of Saint Benedict* in the *Dialogues* written by Gregory the Great, the anonymous *Life of Saint Fursey*, and Bede’s prose *Life of Saint Cuthbert*. By integrating this diverse literature into his text, Felix presented himself as an erudite scholar with access to a rich library.

Furthermore, by using borrowed texts in the prologue, Felix established two levels of meaning. On one level, Felix used these passages to structure and accurately describe his text. Felix characterized himself as a member of a Christian community, and even if his exact position in that community remains unknown – he has, for example, been identified variously as a monk of the Repton monastery and a clerk in the court of King Ælfwald⁴² –, his adoption of Aldhelm’s style confirmed that he actively

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⁴¹ VG, prologue. An important factor in Felix’s biblical citations is the fact that he took many of them not directly from the bible but from their adaptations in other sources. However, both occurrences in the prologue seem to have been direct citations. Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac*,” pp. 28-33.

⁴² Rollason has taken the dedication at face value, even though it is a unique example of an Anglo-Saxon hagiography dedicated to a non-ecclesiastic. He thus argued that Felix wrote for the benefit of the East Anglian dynasty. Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, p. 84. This interpretation was followed by Higham, who suggested that Felix may have been a clerk for Ælfwulf of East Anglia. Higham argued that the Felix asserted East Anglian political dominance and sought to undermine Æthelbald’s self-sufficiency. Higham, “Guthlac’s *Vita*, Mercia and East Anglia,” pp. 85, 89. Cubitt posited a similar association with the East Anglian court. Cubitt, “Memory and Narrative,” p. 56. Conversely, Roberts concluded that the impetus for the *Life of Saint Guthlac* came from the double monastery at Repton, implying that Felix may have been a member of that Mercian community. She argued that the dedication to Ælfwald of East Anglia was necessary to keep this a “hidden agenda.” Roberts, “Hagiography and Literature,” pp. 70, 76.
participated in the discourse of the Anglo-Latin church. Felix’s dedication to King Ælfwald reflected the royal support that religious communities received – regardless of what specific political motivations may have informed Felix’s authorship of the text – as indicated by other material and documentary evidence, and the possibility cannot be dismissed that Ælfwald did indeed commission this text on Guthlac.⁴³ Although Felix outlined his text with a passage borrowed from the *Life of Saint Antony*, he also structured his narrative to fit this outline. Felix advocated a didactic purpose that he modeled on the *Life of Saint Antony*, but he worked toward this stated purpose by inserting moralizing parentheticals throughout the text and by portraying Guthlac as an “exemplary hermit” for others to follow.⁴⁴ Each of these passages also produced another level of meaning by establishing intertextual connections with other texts, significant elements of which have been considered above. By using intertextuality to structure a second level of meaning, Felix emphasized Guthlac’s equivalence to other recognized saints, especially Paul the Hermit, Antony, Martin, Benedict, Fursey, and Cuthbert. Thus these passages carry both immediate value and intertextual implications in the *Life of Saint Guthlac*.

These borrowings mean we can know little about the historical Guthlac. Some historians, encouraged by the many political cues apparently scattered through the text, have endeavored to trace the historical circumstances of Guthlac’s career.⁴⁵ Audrey Meaney painstakingly analyzed the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, striving to extract historical

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⁴³ Roberts, “Hagiography and Literature,” p. 76. Most other interpreters, as mentioned above, have preferred to take this dedication at its face value.

⁴⁴ Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, pp. 84-86.

⁴⁵ Higham, “Guthlac’s *Vita*, Mercia and East Anglia” p. 85.
truth from hagiographic tradition, to “disentangle the historically true from the symbolic and conventional.”46 She eliminated from her consideration the bulk of the text, since: “The miracles that Felix ascribes to Guthlac are all borrowed or adapted from earlier saints’ Lives.”47 She concluded:

One would hope that the bare bones of events – parentage, life as the leader of a warrior gang, conversion, two years of monastic life at Repton, followed by fifteen at Crowland living as an ascetic hermit, and his ordination by Bishop Headda – are to be trusted, though there is no good early supporting evidence for Guthlac's existence. The miracles Felix ascribes to Guthlac are highly suspect, however, since they all appear to be adaptations from earlier hagiography, as could the portent at his birth and the account of his death. These are all included for a purpose: to show how worthy Guthlac was to be considered a saint; they have their part to play in the genre, but are worthless as history.48

Efforts to find an image of the past in the Life of Saint Guthlac have inevitably been frustrated by the hagiographic practices that interwove the text with threads taken from earlier hagiographies. It should be evident that the Life of Saint Guthlac remains open to a broad range of readings, perhaps intentionally so. However, the cues for these readings are ambiguous. As noted above, they have allowed divergent interpretations of the text as either pro-East Anglian or pro-Mercian. Felix seems to have been unconcerned with establishing a single truth, and he may have been comfortably aware that his text allowed for multiple conflicting truths. Thus, although Felix claimed to have solicited the witnesses Wilfred and Cissa for information,49 modern scholars cannot be sure how much, if any, of this information was authentic or

48 Meaney, “Felix’s Life of Guthlac: History or Hagiography?” p. 82.
49 VG, prologue, Ch. 28.
made its way into his text. The *Life of Saint Guthlac*, as a record of the past, seems to be of remarkably dubious fidelity.

**Guthlac's Mound as a Hagiographic Place**

Despite some historians' inabilities to read the *Life of Saint Guthlac* against the hagiographic grain to derive a political meaning, efforts to read the text along its literary grain have shown it to be a remarkably well-constructed hagiographic text. Sarah Downey, who catalogued the verbal quotations, echoes, and references that Felix incorporated into the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, noted: "His *Vita* [life] is no haphazard pastiche by an author desperate for material; in fact, a certain lack of details about Guthlac’s life probably allowed Felix freedom to write an ideal *Vita*."\(^{50}\) For Downey, the ideal hagiographic text created the sanctity of its subject, which in the case of Felix was Guthlac. By reproducing textual materials, Downey argued, Felix demonstrated Guthlac's sanctity. The relationships between texts – or the intertextuality – that Felix established by borrowing from source texts literally structured Guthlac as a member of a textual communion of saints, transforming Guthlac as a hagiographic subject from a particular person into a universal model of sainthood.\(^{51}\) In fact, as mentioned above, Felix not only presented Guthlac as a saint who could be described in the same terms as earlier saints; he also intended Guthlac to serve as a saintly model for others to follow, both aspiring religious readers of his text and hagiographers drawing materials to fit their own saintly subjects.\(^{52}\) The *Life of Saint Guthlac* therefore portrayed Guthlac as

\(^{50}\) Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac*,” p. 25, see also pp. 23-24.


\(^{52}\) Indeed, Felix asserted that Guthlac's search for a hermitage was inspired by his reading of “the solitary life of earlier monks.” VG, 24. This is a further indicator of what Felix saw as the proper role of hagiography.
a new universal model of sainthood that embodied the examples of diverse earlier
saints and was thus a more general and universal model than those of the particular
hagiographic texts from which it was constructed.

Christian Aggeler has studied the hagiographic practice of textual borrowing in
the *Life of Saint Guthlac* as a process of “intralingual (that is, Latin-to-Latin)
translation.”53 He noted that as hagiographers borrowed textual materials, they would
either omit details that seemed inappropriate to their subject or they would translate
them into new terms intended to contextualize their subject appropriately. He thus
argued that despite producing a homogenized model of sainthood, hagiographers such
as Felix produced heterogeneous texts by transforming source materials to fit their
unique narrative settings and titular heroes. Thus while Aggeler described the *Life of
Saint Guthlac* as “an intralingual, intercultural translation” of the *Life of Saint Antony*, he
also argued: “Felix does not simply replicate this image, but also develops and adapts it
for his Anglo-Saxon audience.”54 However, Downey noted that Guthlac’s similarity to
Antony recedes in the later chapters of the text, when borrowings from the *Life of Saint
Antony* are superseded by a broader selection of saints’ *lives*, confirming Guthlac as a
universal model and not just a clone of Antony.55 This broad borrowing culminated in
Guthlac’s death scene, which Felix modeled closely on Bede’s *Life of Saint Cuthbert* but
also included text from the *lives* of Martin, Fursey, Cuthbert, and Benedict. Thus the text

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54 One aspect of this was Felix’s omission of the temptation of lust, which figured prominently in the *Life of
Saint Antony*. He asserted that this was part of a general Anglo-Saxon tendency to suppress issues of

55 Downey, “Intertextuality in the *Lives of St. Guthlac*,” p. 35. See also Aggeler, “Reinventing the Holy
Man,” pp. 66-83.
progressively affirmed that Guthlac was a quintessential saint for the Anglo-Latin community. The *Life of Saint Guthlac* is therefore an exemplary hagiographic text producing a universal model of sainthood but also adapted to the specific circumstances of the Anglo-Latin community of Felix and his contemporaries.

The arguments of Downer and Aggeler have demonstrated that by writing the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, Felix produced a universalized ideal of sanctity and translated it into the particular conditions comprehensible to an Anglo-Saxon audience. Meaney filtered these universalizing passages to reconstruct the historical particularity of Guthlac: a young Mercian warrior who had a conversion experience, spent two years at a monastery, and then embarked upon an eremitic life, eventually being ordained as a priest. However, Felix did not intend his text to be used for such historical reconstructions. Instead, he meant it to demonstrate Guthlac's passage from a person with a particular history into service as a universalized ideal of saintly personhood. Early in the narrative, Felix suggested Guthlac's potential for sanctity by echoing textual materials from the progress of earlier saints. In the final chapters, Felix integrated full passages taken directly from earlier *lives*. Downey discerned that Felix employed an intricate textual structure to bring this transition about. Notably, Felix began the

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56 Felix clearly modeled his description of Guthlac's death on a similar passage in Bede's prose *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, and although Felix introduced the detail of Easter, he retained the same number of days both before and after the Sabbath. Thus Bede had also written that Cuthbert foresaw his death on the fourth day of a week and died on the fourth day of the following week, centered on a Sunday. VG, Ch. 50. VCPr, Ch. 37. Since Bede may have written the *Life of Saint Cuthbert* to assert a rejection of Irish ecclesiastical traditions, one of the most tendentious of which was the Celtic–Roman rift in Easter calculations, Felix's assertion that Guthlac died on Easter – thus conflating Cuthbert's death scene and an Easter date – may have emphasized that the rejection Irish traditions specifically entailed the rejection of the Irish Pascal calendar. Guthlac's death scene may therefore represent an important assertion of Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical independence from Irish influence.

transition with Guthlac’s arrival at the mound. Felix clearly signaled this transition in the text by restarting his narrative: “So to begin to write about the solitary life of St. Guthlac, as I have proposed to do . . .” In this context, then, the image of Guthlac’s mound takes on special significance in the text.

Felix used Guthlac’s arrival at the mound on Crowland to divide his narrative neatly into two halves. The preceding twenty-seven brief chapters narrate Guthlac’s early life, his success as a warrior, his conversion to a monastic life, and his developing determination to follow the examples of earlier saints. The subsequent twenty-six more elaborate chapters repeat the tales of these earlier saints, but in the person of Guthlac. In the first part, then, Felix described his subject Guthlac as a unique historical person doing unique historical things; in the second part, Felix portrayed his subject as a universal and ahistorical type of sanctity in the guise of Guthlac. Felix introduced historical characters throughout both halves of the text – most notably Æthelbald, who was reportedly in exile during Guthlac’s life but had ascended to the throne of Mercia by the time Felix was writing; and Bishop Haedda, presumably of the Lichfield diocese – but he used no temporal markers to distinguish the passage of time between Guthlac’s arrival at Crowland and his death, on a Wednesday after Easter. Whereas the opening

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59 Igitur ut de sancti Guthlaci solitaria vita, sicut proposui, scribere exordiar . . . VG, Ch. 28. Colgrave commented on this passage: “In fact it is pretty clear that Felix regarded the part preceding as a kind of prologue to the Vita proper which only begins with the establishment of he saint on the island which is to be the seat of his warfare.” Colgrave, Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac, p. 182n.

60 Pace Downey, who saw the transition between Guthlac’s private and public miracles in chapters 35-40 as the centerpiece of the text. Downey, “Intertextuality in the Lives of St. Guthlac,” p. 188.

61 In the Colgrave edition of the Life of Saint Guthlac, the first twenty-seven chapters span ten pages; the subsequent twenty-six chapters span forty pages.
chapters describe Guthlac as a dynamic character undergoing a conversion experience and acquiring the prerequisite instruction and inspiration to embark on an eremitic life, Felix emphasized the stasis of Guthlac’s life after arriving at the mound. He described Guthlac’s ascetic habits as “his unchanging way of life since that time when he began to inhabit the desert.”

62 This second part of the text is thus synchronized: there is no discernible passage of time between Guthlac’s arrival and his death, and there is no discernible historical difference between the events of Guthlac’s life and the events described in the lives of earlier saints.

In the second part of the text, then, Felix allowed the miracles of Guthlac to pass without any sort of chronological indices. Meanwhile, he portrayed Guthlac looking more and more like the saints gone before. By arriving at the mound, Guthlac passed from a historical subjectivity of particular personhood into an ahistorical subjectivity of universalized sainthood. Felix’s Guthlac stepped out of time and entered the timeless world of the saints. The miracles that Felix ascribed to Guthlac after this point could have been undertaken by almost any of the saints. Felix thus used textual borrowing to minimize Guthlac’s individuality and produce a sense of timelessness. This methodical borrowing culminated in the episode of Guthlac’s death, which Felix built with text borrowed from the lives of Fursey, Martin, and Cuthbert, and he quoted Guthlac speaking words taken from Gregory the Great’s introduction to the Life of Saint Benedict.

63 As Felix indicated by these textual borrowings, it was Guthlac’s solitary life as a wonder-working hermit that revealed his sanctity, not the dynamic years of his

62 Vitae sciiet illius haec inmota ortonomia fuit, ita u tab illo tempore, quo heremum habitare coeperat. VG, Ch. 28.

early conversion. Thus Felix indicated that this latter portion of the text, which Meaney dismissed as “worthless as history,” was in fact the most important portion to his purposes. The passages that follow Guthlac’s retreat to the burial mound borrow heavily from earlier saints’ *lives*. Whereas Guthlac’s early years seem rooted in historical particularities, his life after settling on Crowland seems to have mirrored an eternal and universal image of sanctity.

Meaney’s judgment thus marginalized Felix’s worldview, which is a worthwhile historical subject of inquiry in its own right. Felix’s use of the mound as a timeless place is an important aspect of this unique occurrence of a mound in hagiography. The episodes of Guthlac’s withdrawal to the wilderness resonate especially with the *Life of Saint Antony*, the *Life of Saint Martin*, and the *Life of Saint Benedict*, but the text describing the mound borrows verbal elements from none. The mound is thus a uniquely Anglo-Saxon element of the landscape that Felix used at the turning point of his text.⁶⁴ This deliberate use of a mound at a critical moment in the narrative indicates that Felix anticipated his readers to interpret Guthlac’s mound as a meaningful place. In order to understand Felix’s text, it is therefore necessary to explore how mounds had become meaningful for Felix.

**Mounds as Meaningful Places**

A fresh review of the archaeological evidence for mound use during the Anglo-Saxon period permits a better idea of the traditions to which Felix could have been referring to when writing the *Life of Saint Guthlac*. These traditions did not consist solely

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⁶⁴ Aggeler, “Reinventing the Holy Man,” p. 43. Notably, Felix borrowed from Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert* when first describing Crowland. *VG*, Ch. 25. As will be shown below, however, this passage should not be conflated with the passage describing the mound.
of symbolic meanings attached to material objects but involved a range of practices that engaged the materiality of mounds. Materiality is a vibrant area of research in the growing field of material culture studies. Theories of materiality build upon the recognition that thoughts, action, and language are necessarily mediated by material things. The archaeologist John Robb has argued:

agency is fundamentally material, for two reasons: because material things mediate and form the context for relationships between people, and because people form important relations with material things. The materiality of agency provides the basis for formulating a range of interpretative strategies with which we can tackle the material residues of the past.

Materiality, as an interpretive strategy, allows a study of the material contexts in which the Life of Saint Guthlac was written, particularly regarding mound use. It focuses study on what mounds were actually doing in human relationships: how people formed relationships by using mounds, and how mound use reflected how people used and related to the world around them. A study of the materiality of mounds must therefore take into its scope the patterns of social life that intersected with burial mounds, as features in the landscape, as places of burial, and as spaces for social interaction.

Many factors hinder the study of early Anglo-Saxon mound use. Foremost among these is the disappearance of mounds prior to the advent of modern archaeological practices. Disappearance in England has largely been a function of soil

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65 For a recent overview of material culture studies, see D. Hicks, “The Material Culture Turn: Event and Effect,” in D. Hicks and M.C. Beaudry (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies, (Oxford, 2010), pp. 25-98. The discussion of mounds that follows thus draws eclectically on functionalist, structuralist, and post-structuralist methodologies.


67 For a study of the materiality of mounds in Neolithic and Bronze Age Britain, to which the following analysis is much indebted, see J. Barrett, Fragments from Antiquity: An Archaeology of Social Life in Britain, 2900-1200 BC (Cambridge, 1994).
conditions and erosion, compounded by human activities such as agriculture, forest husbandry, and systematic leveling. These processes have worked to prevent the identification of mounds and obliterate any material remains. When remains are nevertheless identified, they predominantly survive around the perimeters of mounds; destructive processes are most severe on the remains of centrally placed burials and structures. Furthermore, burial without grave goods became common by the 8th century. Thus even where mounds have been identified, few material indicators of later Anglo-Saxon burials may survive in areas with acidic soils. Together, these factors have incalculably reduced the amount of data available for archaeological recovery.

Where mounds have survived into the modern period, many have attracted the deleterious attentions of robbers or amateur antiquarians. For example, several of the mounds at Sutton Hoo were plundered in the 16th or 17th century. The surviving mounds were then subjected to antiquarian excavations in the 19th century. The only record of these excavations is a single announcement made in a local periodical, reporting that two bushels (70 liters or 18.6 gallons) of iron bolts had been collected and converted to horseshoes. Archaeologist Martin Carver has inferred that these bolts were ship-rivets taken from Mound 2, where an additional 496 rivets were found during 20th-century archaeological campaigns. He approximated that the two bushels comprised roughly 2000 rivets, corresponding to the estimated number of rivets

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69 Williams, “Ancient Landscapes and the Dead,” pp. 22-23.


required for a 24m-long ship. This compares to Mound 1 where 1560 rivets were recovered from a ship measured at 27m in length, which Carver calculated to have originally carried 2500 rivets.\(^7^2\) Although no evidence survived from the antiquarian intervention to demonstrate that Mound 2 was as richly furnished as Mound 1, the antiquarians certainly found sufficient motivation to excavate a total of at least seven mounds.\(^7^3\) These unrecorded excavations at Sutton Hoo are symptomatic of a pervasive loss of information regarding Anglo-Saxon mound use due to secondary interventions, and Carver’s analysis hints at the ingenuity required of modern archaeologists to recover lost information.

Conversely, some antiquarian excavations preserved much information that would have otherwise been lost due to modern agriculture and urbanization. For example, high concentrations of burial sites known from East Yorkshire represent the excavations of two especially thorough antiquarians active at the turn of the 20th century.\(^7^4\) In the absence of systematic survey, Howard Williams, an archaeologist of Anglo-Saxon mortuary rites, has therefore concluded that distribution maps – at least with regard to monument reuse – must be assumed to reflect such historical accidents of excavation rather than the actual distribution of Anglo-Saxon practices.\(^7^5\) Taken together, these factors of unrecorded loss and unsystematic recovery restrict


\(^{73}\) Carver recorded that seven or eight of the surviving mounds had been subject to major excavations before the archaeological campaigns of the 20th century, and two further mounds evinced unsuccessful attempts. Carver, *Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground*, p. 462.

\(^{74}\) The excavators in question are William Greenwell (1820-1918) and John Robert Mortimer (1825-1911). B.M. Marsden, *The Early Barrow Diggers* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 131-150.

\(^{75}\) Williams, “Ancient Landscapes and the Dead,” pp. 19-21.
archaeologists to a highly unrepresentative sample of the remains initially associated with Anglo-Saxon mound use.

A further limitation to the study of the mound use that preceded Felix’s *Life of Saint Guthlac* is the self-imposed disciplinary preference among many Anglo-Saxonists to confine their studies within the borders of modern England. Thus studies of Anglo-Saxon mound use, including the present discussion, largely exclude reference to Wales, Scotland, Ireland, northern Gaul, northern Germany, and Scandinavia.\(^7\) Carver has noted that useful comparisons are hindered by chronological uncertainties for sites in many of these regions.\(^7\) Recent surveys are indicative of the narrow focus of Anglo-Saxon mortuary archaeology: *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, *Death in Medieval England*, and *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain*.\(^7\) One notable exception to this narrow geographic focus is a survey provided by Michael Müller-Wille, who produced a brief summary of a conference on the convergence of burial practices throughout medieval Europe as formative to the concept of Europe.\(^7\) Nevertheless,

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\(^7\) S. Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death: Burial Rites in Early England* (Stroud, 2000); D.M. Hadley, *Death in Medieval England: An Archaeology* (Stroud, 2001); H. Williams, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain* (Cambridge, 2006). This focus is narrow, in part, due to the wealth of literature already produced regarding Anglo-Saxon mortuary practices. Notably, Hamerow, in her efforts to integrate Anglo-Saxon archaeology into North Sea contexts did not attempt a general synthesis of mortuary evidence. See, for example, Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*, pp. 107-09, 116-19, 167-68.

Anglo-Saxonists’ limited use of potential supraregional comparisons of Anglo-Saxon mortuary rituals precludes recognition of many potentially significant aspects of burial rites.

Despite these difficulties and methodological shortcomings, archaeologists have succeeded in recovering significant evidence for mound use in England. The earliest use of mounds began well before the Anglo-Saxon period. Prehistoric mounds had been constructed in England primarily during the Neolithic (4000-2500 BCE) and Bronze Ages (2500-500 BCE), although intermittent projects continued into the Iron Age (500 BCE-1 CE). Archaeological evidence indicates that most mounds were used for burial, but some sites have yielded no indicators of burial rites, suggesting that these mounds may have been built for other purposes. The earliest mounds tended to be long barrows, frequently with one end built taller and thinner to overlay a chamber built of timber or large stones. Long barrows were constructed only during the Neolithic period, and by the Bronze Age, round barrows became the dominant mode of construction. During the Iron Age, square barrows were constructed as well. The shape and size of prehistoric mounds thus varied, but many were monumental projects that were intermittently or continuously augmented and adjusted over the course of centuries. Evidence for these long-term or recurring construction projects is associated primarily with Neolithic mounds. Mound construction was especially intensive during the Bronze Age but suffered a sharp decline during the Iron Age, leading to an almost complete

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80 Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows are the subjects of a thorough survey in Woodward, British Barrows. Scholarship on Britain typically differentiates the Iron Age from the Roman Period, which is typically dated to the Roman occupation of 43 CE. However, for those areas of northern Europe that never came under Roman governance, discussion of the Iron Age typically includes much of the early medieval period, sometimes extending as far as the conversion of Scandinavia in the 10th and 11th centuries.
abandonment of mound construction from the Roman period through the 5th century.\textsuperscript{81} Despite this disuse, many prehistoric mounds survived in the Anglo-Saxon period as recognizable features in the landscape.\textsuperscript{82}

These prehistoric mounds have been shown to have played a statistically significant role in Anglo-Saxon burial practices between the 5th and 12th centuries. Over 1200 Anglo-Saxon burial sites have been identified from this period, the largest of which have yielded thousands of burials preserved from continuous use over a span of centuries.\textsuperscript{83} Archaeological interpretations have been assisted by the high occurrence of grave goods in burial finds and by the frequent association of cemeteries with monuments and landscape features. At least 230 of the 1200 identified burial sites (19.2\%) show reuse of prehistoric mounds,\textsuperscript{84} and over 100 additional sites (8.3\%) evince construction of new mounds in the Anglo-Saxon period.\textsuperscript{85} In sum, mounds were associated with over a quarter (27.5\%) of known Anglo-Saxon burial sites. The spectacular aspects of burial mounds have long drawn the attentions of antiquarians and archaeologists, and detailed analysis indicates that mounds were likewise significant to Anglo-Saxons.

Monuments, including prehistoric mounds, attracted new burials beginning in the early Anglo-Saxon period. The earliest of these so-called secondary burials date to the

\textsuperscript{81} Carver, “Reflections on the Meanings of Monumental Barrows in Anglo-Saxon England,” p. 133.

\textsuperscript{82} Prominence in the landscape was likely a dominant factor in their selection for reuse during the Anglo-Saxon period. Thus many mounds were located on ridgelines and promontories. Lucy, \textit{The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death}, pp. 124-30. Woodward has also highlighted the likely importance of view and visibility as determinants for prehistoric mound construction. Woodward, \textit{British Barrows}, pp. 128-44.

\textsuperscript{83} Williams, “Ancient Landscapes and the Dead,” p. 29n25.

\textsuperscript{84} Williams, “Ancient Landscapes and the Dead,” p. 17.

\textsuperscript{85} Lucy, \textit{The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death}, p. 147.
middle of the 5th century. This dating neatly coincides with Bede’s record of the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons circa 451. The origin of this practice – whether it was an indigenous development or a practice adopted or imported from elsewhere – is uncertain. Nevertheless, the use of prehistoric mounds for secondary burials had important practical effects for the early Anglo-Saxons. By burying their dead on and around monuments, the Anglo-Saxons used these monuments as a palimpsest to establish an ancestral presence in the landscape that infused these monuments with new meaning. Mounds thus became important symbols of ancestral presence for the Anglo-Saxons.

This establishment of mounds as places of ancestral permanence in the landscape corresponded to a period of shifting settlement patterns. During the preceding Roman period in Britain (1st through 5th centuries), villas and urban centers

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89 Williams has compellingly articulated this general argument for the Anglo-Saxon reuse of prehistoric monuments, and he has also characterized this practice as a claim on resources or the imposition of identities. Williams, “Ancient Landscapes and the Dead,” pp. 25-26. The use of cemeteries to establish ancestral presence has been further theorized elsewhere. See e.g., Barrett, Fragments from Antiquity, pp. 52-53, 136-37.

90 Hamerow, who has dedicated much study to the shifting settlement patterns of early Anglo-Saxon England, noted: “burial frequently continued to take place in ancestral burial grounds even when settlements moved.” Hamerow, Early Medieval Settlements, p. 105. Compare to the fragmentation of Neolithic society discussed by Barrett, Fragments from Antiquity, pp. 149-52.
had emerged as places of continuous settlement. Although a few of these places continued to be occupied through the sub-Roman period (5th century), new settlement patterns dominated Britain during the early Saxon period. Settlements in the 5th and 6th centuries were especially short-lived. Many continually shifted, even over the course of a single generation. These settlements have been characterized as migrating settlements, or *Wandersiedlungen*. Human presence in the landscape was therefore exceedingly transitory during this period. Mounds, as well as other prehistoric monuments made meaningful by collocating them with ancestral cemeteries, provided early Anglo-Saxons with stable loci to preserve their sense of community identity in this shifting landscape.

By the mid-6th century, a significant amount of labor was being given over to constructing monuments for the dead. This included both increasingly intensive projects of prehistoric monument reuse and the construction of new monuments, especially burial mounds. In the 7th century, the construction of new mounds reached its apogee

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91 Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, pp. 8-12.


94 This identity could also be imposed or created. Williams, “Ancient Landscapes and the Dead,” p. 26. Regardless of whether the identity itself retained a constant value, however, mounds allowed a constant sense of community. The anthropologist Tim Ingold, considering the territorial behavior of hunter-gatherer societies, described the construction of as a zero-dimensional kind of tenure, in which ownership centers on places, sites or locations. T. Ingold, “Territoriality and Tenure: The Appropriation of Space in Hunting and Gathering Societies,” in T. Ingold (ed.), *The Appropriation of Nature: Essays on Human Ecology and Social Relations* (Iowa City, 1987), pp. 130-64, at pp. 147-48. Barrett applied this model to Neolithic Britain: “The burial mounds now emerged as the most significant, permanent points of reference to anyone wishing either to locate themselves in that landscape or to describe the setting of the plain and the ridgeway.” Barrett, *Fragments from Antiquity*, p. 128.

in Britain.96 Mounds were larger and more richly furnished than ever before, and their construction could involve just as much effort as activities of subsistence.97 Either project – the reuse of a mound or the construction of a new mound – required a significant investment of labor that could only be achieved through a community effort. These monumental burials were thus community projects and promoted a sense of community identity.98 Thus Felix tacitly noted that at some point Guthlac’s mound must have been constructed as a social project. His reference to the “clods of earth” of which Guthlac’s mound had been built may be read as an oblique reference to memories of more recent mound constructions, perhaps even the monumental burials at Sutton Hoo which would likely still have been remembered among Felix’s contemporaries.99

Although settlement patterns were already changing by the time when Felix wrote the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, this brief archaeological excursus helps explain why he used a mound to mark Guthlac’s transition from historical particularities to a model of universalized sanctity. Mounds were recognizable features in the British landscape prior to the Anglo-Saxon period, and the Anglo-Saxons attached new practical meanings to

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97 For Mound 2 at Sutton Hoo, Carver calculated: “it would have taken about 660 man-hours to build Mound 2, assuming they had wheelbarrows or their equivalent. . . . This is the equivalent extra workload of an additional harvest; it thus represents a considerable investment.” Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?*, p. 166.

98 Timothy Pauketat has similarly argued that among the Mississippian mound builders, CE 1000-1200, the mound building practices “were not the consequences of political evolution but were the actual structuring process of change . . . . In Mississippian times, the building of earthen platforms . . . was a ‘surface phenomenon’ that inculcated a coordinated power and an inclusive tradition.” T. Pauketat, “The Tragedy of the Commoners,” in M. Dobres and J.E. Robb (eds.), *Agency in Archaeology*, (London, 2000), pp. 113-29, at p. 123.

99 The latest datable mound burial is Mound 14, based on its assemblage for which Carver suggested a date range of between 630 and 670. Carver, *Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground*, p. 310. However, as noted above, there are significant difficulties in dating Anglo-Saxon burials from this period, and change in burial rites did not become pervasive until around 720.
these features as they began to use them as burial sites. These practices appropriated
the ready symbols of mounds and established them as symbols of ancestral presence
and points of permanence in a landscape that otherwise seemed to be in constant flux.
Felix’s use of a mound at the point of transition in the *Life of Saint Guthlac* therefore
resonated strongly with preceding practices that had established mounds as markers of
permanence with ancestral burial. For Felix, writing in a society still familiar with these
traditions of mound use, a mound was therefore an Anglo-Saxon version of Antony’s
desert tomb and an appropriate place for Guthlac to join his spiritual forebears and
become a member of the communion of saints.

**Mounds and Demons**

Scholars have generally drawn on these pre-Christian practices of mound burial
to interpret the mound in the *Life of Saint Guthlac* as a place of pagan ancestors *qua*
demons. Although scholars have variously read the text in terms of Guthlac’s historical
career or Felix’s literary purpose, there has been a broad consensus that Guthlac chose
to inhabit a mound – or at least that Felix portrayed him doing so – because mounds
were already considered places of demonic possession. This interpretation builds from
Felix’s description of Crowland: “No settler had been able to inhabit it alone before
Guthlac the servant of Christ, on account of the phantoms of demons dwelling there.”
Furthermore, after Guthlac had established his dwelling on the broken mound, he was
assaulted there by troops of demons:

> Indeed the door was open to them as came in from all around; for entering
through nooks and crannies, neither door joints nor cracks in the wattle

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100 *Nullus hanc ante famulum Christi Guthlacum solus habitare colonus valebat, propter videlicet illic
demorantium fantasias demonum.* VG, Ch. 25.
denied them entry; but erupting from heaven and earth, they covered the whole space of the air in dark clouds.\textsuperscript{101}

These and similar passages have encouraged modern scholars to infer that Felix understood mounds as places already inhabited by demons.

This interpretation, which depends upon a Christian cosmology, pervades scholarship on Anglo-Saxon burial mounds and has been projected back into interpretations of the pre-literate pagan past. Hilda Ellis Davidson, in her seminal article on Anglo-Saxon mounds, believed that something of this picture was “due to the pagan tradition of the dead in the grave-mound, and that these creatures are its inhabitants.”\textsuperscript{102} More recently, Sarah Semple has cited the descriptions of Guthlac’s mound as evidence for the Anglo-Saxon “fear of barrows.” She concluded: “The root of this perception may be the remembrance of early Anglo-Saxon pagan activity which took place at barrows.”\textsuperscript{103} Howard Williams also followed this interpretation: “in this instance, the mound was \textit{inhabited}, and inhabitation is the key theme linking the associations of the mound and the focus of conflict between Guthlac and the demons.”\textsuperscript{104} Stephen Pollington succinctly summarized the underlying arguments thus:

In Christian times, the sites of heathen graves gained a new importance as unconsecrated ground. Barrows were designated as \textit{cwealmstowa}, places of legal execution, and there are many examples of Middle Saxon burials around and between such mounds; presumably the punishment extended to the afterlife where the soul would be attacked by the mound’s inhabitant.

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Subeuntibus enim ab undique illis porta patebat; nam per criptas et cratulas intrantibus non iuncturae valvarum, non foramina cratium illis ingressum negabant; sed caelo terraque erumpentes, spatium totius aeris fuscis nubibus tegebant}. VG, Ch. 31.


\textsuperscript{104} Williams, \textit{Death and Memory}, p. 206. His emphasis.
This was the fate which befell St. Guthlac when he built his hermit’s retreat in the side of a burial mound: he was beset by harmful spirits.105

These arguments therefore depend on two premises: first, that pagan practices established the mounds as places of ancestral presence; and second, that these ancestral spirits were demonized upon the acceptance of a Christian cosmology.

These interpretations of Guthlac’s mound accord well with the influential interpretation of Sutton Hoo proposed by Martin Carver, who headed the last and most thorough excavation campaign there and published its findings.106 Excavations at Sutton Hoo revealed a cemetery of seventeen richly furnished barrows, constructed during the 6th and 7th centuries.107 Two of the 7th-century burials included the interment of large sea-going vessels,108 and the last datable mound burial – a woman inhumed in a chamber – may have been built during Guthlac’s lifetime.109 Carver

105 S. Pollington, Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds: Princely Burial in the 6th and 7th Centuries (Swaffham, 2008), p. 83. His footnotes to this passage included the scholarship of Carver, Ellis Davidson, Geake, Semple, and Williams.

106 Carver’s influence has been felt in the steady stream of publications on the rich finds of Sutton Hoo, through a number of volumes he has edited, and his prolific contributions to other edited volumes. I am heavily indebted to Carver’s scholarship, as the footnotes passim the present discussion indicate. Since his linguistic model cannot be usefully applied to Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac, however, I hope my arguments will augment his insights rather than contradict them.

107 Among the many publications on Sutton Hoo, the most thorough is Carver, Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground and its Context.

108 These two burials – one in a chamber beneath a 24m-long ship and the other a chamber on a 27m-long, but without surviving evidence of a corpse – have been especially influential in Carver’s interpretation of mound use at Sutton Hoo. As mentioned above, one of these burials was significantly disturbed in the 19th century. Nevertheless, Carver has argued that these burials asserted a sense of community with other groups using boat burial rites in southern Sweden. For these connections and their problems, see M. Carver, “Boat-Burial in Britain: Ancient Custom or Political Signal?” in O. Crumlin-Pedersen and B. Munch Thye (eds.), The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia (Copenhagen, 1995), pp. 110-24. A further ship burial from this period has more recently been found in Estonia. M. Konsa, R. Allmäe, L. Maldre, and J. Vassiljev, “Rescue Excavations of a Vendel Era Boat-grave in Salme, Saaremaa,” Archaeological Fieldworks in Estonia 2008 (2009), pp. 53–64.

109 The assemblage recovered from the female bed burial Mound 14 suggests a 7th-century date within the broad range of 630 and 670, and Carver has thus inferred a date of the middle or second half of the century. Carver, Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground, pp. 113, 298, 310. Thus this
interpreted the burials at Sutton Hoo in the context of Christian–pagan conflict, a conflict contested from the cultural cores of Christian Gaul and pagan Scandinavia.

Carver described the cemetery at Sutton Hoo as the last defiant gasp of a Scandinavian-style paganism in England before the Anglo-Saxons succumbed to the advance of Christianization:

Sutton Hoo was the burial ground of ‘kings’, who can now be shown to have been dynastic (honouring children), militantly pagan and claiming the right over life and death . . . . So, if we believe (in line with modern theories of material culture) that burial, and perhaps most particularly burial at this level of status, is a deliberate statement made by intelligent humans at a moment of crisis, then the signals which emanate from Sutton Hoo are specific, the cry of a people at once pagan, autonomous, maritime and concerned to conserve an ancestral allegiance with the Scandinavian heartlands and their politics, across the North sea [sic].

The conquest of Christianity and defeat of Scandinavian paganism thus necessitated new types of mound use:

Sutton Hoo is here interpreted as a short-lived and theatrical monument created in response to the first Christian missions to England [begin in 596 in the neighboring kingdom of Kent]. The burials expressed the identity and autonomy of East Anglian aristocrats, their aspiration to kingship and their resistance to the political and ideological agenda of early seventh-century continental Christianity. When the ideological battle was lost, East Anglia became a Christian kingdom and the former princely burial-ground became a place of execution.

In short, Carver has interpreted the mound burials at Sutton Hoo as symbolic expressions in the vocabulary of a defiant paganism.

burial may have been near contemporaneous to Guthlac’s birth, which Meaney calculated from indicators in the Life of Saint Guthlac as either 674 or 676. Meaney, “Felix’s Life of Guthlac: History or Hagiography?” p. 76.


Carver’s arguments rely on the premise that Anglo-Saxons throughout the Anglo-Saxon period treated mounds as a symbol firmly attached to pagan cosmology, despite the cultural disruptions of Christianization and the upheavals of the long 8th century. The continuation or abandonment of mound burial practices thus reflected the acceptance or rejection of paganism. As long as Anglo-Saxon culture remained pagan, mounds retained their positive connotations that attracted elite and common burials alike. After Christianization, however, mound burial was shunned and used only to materialize the exclusion of criminals from the Christian community. Those who were socially undesirable could be consigned a place among the pagan dead, that is, among those denied the benefit of Christian salvation.  

There are compelling reasons, however, not to apply this interpretation of burial mounds to the *Life of Saint Guthlac*. Although Felix could have used Guthlac’s mound as an elite, dynastic, pagan, and Scandinavian symbol, there is little to indicate such a symbolic use in the text. The supposed wealth of the mound had been stolen, the memories of those interred had been forgotten, Felix attributed no ritual importance to the spot, and the political horizons of the *Life of Saint Guthlac* remain rooted in the local Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and East Anglia. These circumstantial details aside, the fundamental problem in both Carver’s interpretation of Sutton Hoo and the prevailing scholarship on Guthlac’s mound arises from the unexplained assumption that Christianization necessarily entailed the demonization of mounds.

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112 Andrew Reynolds has also offered this as a possible explanation for the location of Late Saxon execution cemeteries at earlier Anglo-Saxon burial mounds, although his primary analytic concern was the relationship between deviant burials and boundaries. A. Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 238, 249-50.
This theory of demonization depends on assumptions of both the continued Christian acceptance of the pagan cosmology that established the mound as a place of ancestral presence and Christian rejection of pagan cosmology as a worldview dominated by demons. Felix's acceptance of the mound as a place of ancestral significance has been established with reference to his use of the mound as the transition point in his hagiographic text, as a symbolic place where Guthlac could join in the communion of saints. However, the association of the mound with demonic presence has not been adequately established for the *Life of Saint Guthlac*. The hypothetical association of mounds and demons in the *Life of Saint Guthlac* must be rejected for at least three reasons: Felix described the mound in a sequence where demonic assaults began only after the saint had already arrived at his hermitage there; Felix deliberately kept passages describing demonic presence in the landscape separate from his passage describing Guthlac's mound; and no evidence for a demonic association with mounds can be compellingly shown to predate the *Life of Saint Guthlac*.

First, Felix wrote the passage that described Guthlac's mound as part of a sequence modeled on the *Life of Saint Antony*.\(^{113}\) According to the Evagrian life, Antony determined to follow the example of Elijah, presumably the account of Elijah's flight to Horeb and his seclusion in a cave there.\(^{114}\) Antony therefore had a friend seal him in a

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\(^{113}\) On Felix's *tumulus* as a translation of the Evagrian *supulchra*, see Aggeler, "Reinventing the Holy Man," p. 50.

\(^{114}\) 1 Kings 19: 3-9. In the preceding chapter, Antony quoted 1 Kings 18: 15, an oath to appear before King Ahab, which begins the sequence leading to his flight to Horeb. This passage also recalls Obadiah's concealment of one hundred prophets in caves to protect them from Jezebel. Cf. VA, Chs. 7-8. Felix hinted that Guthlac considered both Elijah and the Egyptian hermits as his models, as well as Moses and Jesus Christ. VG, Ch. 30.
tomb. Only then was he assailed by demons: “The devil thus fearing that Antony would in due time cause even the desert to be inhabited, he and his minions bloodied Antony with various wounds so that he could neither speak nor move due to the magnitude of his suffering.”  

Felix extended this same sequence over the course of several chapters. He recorded that Guthlac was likewise inspired by the examples of holy men, that he settled on a burial mound as a sort of tomb, and that he too was assaulted by an army of demons.  

In their final assault, the demons expressed the same purpose as the devil had in his attacks on Antony: they demanded that Guthlac depart from the desert. However, they only made this demand after they had physically removed Guthlac from the mound and carried him out into the swamp, and they used the word for desert rather than mound. Therefore, in the course of this sequence Guthlac’s mound cannot be interpreted as a place initially possessed by demons. In the chapter describing the mound, Felix described only Guthlac settling there and immediately adopting a rule of fasting and asceticism that he preserved throughout the duration of his life. This description accords with Guthlac’s transformation at the burial mound into a universal model of sanctity, and the appearance of the devil and his minions in this passage would have violated the structural purpose of this episode. They only appeared thereafter.

115 Metuens ergo diabolus, ne accessu temporis eremum quoque habitari faceret, ita eum aggregatis satellitibus suis, uaria caede laceravit, ut doloris magnitudo et motum auferret et uocem. VA, Ch. 8.

116 VG, Chs. 24, 28, 31.

117 [E]xtra cellulam suam duxerunt, et adductum in atrae paludis coenosis laticibus inmerserunt . . . imperantes sibi, ut de heremo discedisset. VG, Ch. 31.

118 VG, Ch. 28.
This leads to a second point: the impression of the demonic possession of Guthlac's mound can only be achieved by conflating other distinct episodes with the passage describing the mound. The only plausible such passage preceding Guthlac’s arrival at the mound described his withdrawal into the Fenland wilderness. In this passage, Felix recorded that as Guthlac was asking for information about the Fens:

Tatwine confessed that he knew of an island in the hidden parts of the further desert, which many had tried to inhabit but had rejected on account of unknown monsters of the desert and terrors of various forms . . . . No settler had been able to inhabit it alone before Guthlac the servant of Christ, on account of the phantoms of demons dwelling there.

This passage described Crowland, which cannot be directly equated as a metonym for the later image of the mound for several reasons. First, two entire chapters intervened, describing Guthlac’s exploration of the Fens and his return to the monastery for provisions and final farewells, between the first mention of demons and the description of the mound. Second, Felix borrowed this passage regarding demonic possession of the landscape from Bede’s *Life of Saint Cuthbert*. Cuthbert had likewise sought a secluded hermitage and settled upon the island of Farne. As Bede recorded: “No settler had been able to inhabit it alone without trouble before Cuthbert the servant of the Lord, on account of the phantoms of demons dwelling there.”

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119 Most scholars prefer not to commit to a strict reading of Felix but instead offer general comments such as, “inhabitation is the key theme linking the associations of the mound and the focus of conflict between Guthlac and the demons.” Williams, *Death and Memory*, p. 206. However, see J. Harte, “Hell on Earth: Encountering Devils in the Medieval Landscape,” in B. Bildhauer and R. Mills (eds.), *The Monstrous Middle Ages* (Toronto, 2003), pp. 177-95, at p. 190.

120 *Tatwine se scisse aliam insulam in abditis remotioris heremi partibus confitebatur, quam multi inhabitare tentantes propter incognita heremi monstra et diversarum formarum terrors reprobaverant . . . . Nullus hanc ante famulum Christi Guthlacum solus habitare colonus valebat, propter videlicet illic demorantium fantasias demonum . . . . VG, Ch. 25.

121 *Nullus hanc facile ante famulum Domini Cuthbertum solus ualebat inhabitare colonus, propter uidelicet demorantium ibi phantasias demonum*. VCPr, Ch. 17.
Felix therefore used this passage to compare Guthlac to Cuthbert and Crowland to Farne. If Felix had intended to demonize the mound, this passage would have provided him an optimal description of demonic possession. However, Felix delayed his description of the mound for a further two chapters, describing the mound in a context drawn from Evagrius’ *Life of Antony* rather than Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert*. This passage therefore cannot be meaningfully associated with Guthlac’s mound. Thus the demonization of mounds depends upon the conflation of two distinct narrative structures: the withdrawal of Guthlac into a dangerous area, as emphasized by his connections to Cuthbert, and the attacks Guthlac provoked after settling in a particular place, as emphasized by his connections to Antony. The site of Guthlac’s dwelling, the burial mound, cannot therefore be assumed to have been a symbolically dangerous place for Felix. Instead, the saint’s entry into a dangerous area provoked demonic assaults only after he had settled in a particular location.

Finally, Guthlac’s mound cannot be convincingly interpreted as a place of demonized pagan ancestors in the context of external textual and material evidence. The most compelling such contexts are the evidence for executions and deviant burials at mounds as catalogued by Andrew Reynolds and the manuscript illuminations of hell that resemble mound landscapes as identified by Sarah Semple.  

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123 Colgrave, introduction to *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac*, p. 19.
as early as the 7th or 8th centuries and may thus be roughly contemporaneous with Felix. Of these, only two are associated with mounds: Sutton Hoo and Walkington Wold. However, Carver preferred a date for the Sutton Hoo deviant burials no earlier than the 8th century, and a recent reanalysis of Walkington Wold has produced a similar general date. Although in both cases, the archaeological evidence may predate the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, the broad date ranges provided by radiocarbon analysis also allow that the earliest executions associated with mounds might not have occurred until around 775, over a generation after the *Life of Saint Guthlac* had begun circulating throughout Anglo-Saxon England. The manuscript evidence compiled by Semple is even later, dating from the 10th and 11th centuries. In short, although Felix’s description of Guthlac’s mound and his struggles with demons may have influenced these later material and textual practices, there is insufficient evidence to prove that mounds were associated with demonic presence prior to the *Life of Saint Guthlac*.

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124 The other two cemeteries are Cambridge and Staines, both associated with ditches. Reynolds dismissed the inclusion of South Acre, Norfolk, as an early execution cemetery due to unreliable carbon dating and evidence suggesting that the execution cemetery may have unintentionally disturbed an earlier cemetery. Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*, pp. 126, 236.

125 The 95% probability range for the earliest three radiocarbon samples are 680-980, 650-980, and 650-780. Carver, *Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground*, pp. 55, 347-48. Thus the earliest executions at Sutton Hoo may have predated the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, but they also need not have begun until at least fifty years later.

126 The 95% probability range for the earliest sample is 640-775. J.L. Buckberry and D.M. Hadley, “An Anglo-Saxon Execution Cemetery at Walkington Wold, Yorkshire,” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 26 (2007): pp. 309-29, at p. 312. Again, this burial may or may not have predated Felix’s *Life of Saint Guthlac*. Furthermore, Walkington Wold is located in Yorkshire, and thus unlikely to have informed a text situated in the area of Cambridgeshire.

A Landscape without Mounds

Thus the structure of the Life of Saint Guthlac indicates that Felix imagined mounds as places of ancestral importance, places appropriate for a holy man such as Guthlac to enter into a communion of saints with his spiritual forefathers. This use drew on mounds as a nexus of ancestral presence through continuous burial across generations, as a symbol of permanence in an otherwise changing landscape, and as a marker of community identity. However, by the time Felix was writing, the Anglo-Saxons had largely abandoned the material practices that affirmed these associations. A new mode of permanent settlement was working to marginalize the role of mounds in landscape, and these changes were just beginning to be felt during the early 8th century.

Felix’s dismal description of the Fenland landscape has seized the imagination of modern scholars. The initial impression given by his description is that of an empty wasteland stretching beyond the pale of human society:

There is in the Midland parts of Britain a most dark swamp of immense size . . . . Here in pools, there in muddy spots, sometimes with waters that are black with flowing fog, and often punctuated with islands and woods in the twisting turns of little streams, it extends in a lengthy tract from the south as far north as the sea.128

Felix further elaborated upon this bleak landscape in the subsequent passage describing Guthlac's arrival at Crowland, already excerpted above with reference to its borrowings from Bede’s Life of Saint Cuthbert:

Guthlac . . . arrived at the said place traveling with Christ through the trackless bogs within the borders of the dark swamp. It is called Crowland, an island placed in the middle of the swamp, which had been known to few and hardly cultivated on account of the very remote solitude of the desert. No settler had been able to inhabit it alone before Guthlac the servant of Christ, on account of the phantoms of demons dwelling there.129

These passages thus paint the landscape in dismal hues.

The dominant interpretation of Felix's landscape has built upon such an impressionistic reading of these passages. One interpreter summarized Felix's description thus: "the fen was a flat, empty space, ready to be populated by the protagonists in a spiritual drama."130 Alfred Siewers, a scholar of Anglo-Saxon literature, likewise interpreted Felix's image of the Fens as empty space as a product of Christian theology and as a necessary precondition for later nation-building.131 Regarding both the *Life of Saint Guthlac* and *Beowulf* as evidence for Mercian state-building and Anglo-Saxon nation-building, Siewers argued that images of the landscape in these texts can be understood as the precursor for:

> the establishment of the autonomy of the individual hero (and of his warrior/proto-Christian culture) with respect to the natural landscape, the Subject in relation to the Other. Politically this is paralleled in an emergence of an ideology of individualized, proprietary and patrimonial but national monarchy in the Anglo-Saxon and Frankish realms.132

Siewers asserted that the texts produced this image by providing a narrative that treated the landscape as a palimpsest and ultimately as a cenotaph: "And in a trend begun in

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129 *Guthlac*. . . *per invia lustra inter atrae paludis margines Christo viatore ad praedictum locum usque pervenit; Crugland dicitur, insula media in palude posita quae ante paucis propter remotorius heremi solitudinem inculta vix nota habebatur. Nullus hanc ante famulum Christi Guthlacum solus habitare colonus valebat, propter videlicet illic demorantium fantasias demonum. VG, Ch. 25.

130 Harte, "Hell on Earth," pp. 177-95.


that formative era of early medieval narratives of nation-building, landscape became in
the West both a palimpsest for human moral and political concerns, and a cenotaph in
its lack of real engagement with larger forces of nature.”

Nicholas Howe, studying
Anglo-Saxon literature in general and not specifically the Guthlac texts, likewise
identified emptiness as a literary trope in Anglo-Saxon heroic literature: the dismal land-
and seascapes of the texts described an emptiness that made room for the heroic
literary theme of interior, existential crisis. Howe thus described these landscapes as “a
counter to the world of human sociability and community.”

They provided a space
where a hero could clearly articulate his individuality, standing alone in an otherwise
barren world. Thus studies of the Life of Saint Guthlac have tended to focus on the
desolation of the landscape as described by the text.

This approach, however, has neglected analysis of how Felix constructed this
description and the basic textual mechanics that made this description possible. Howe
described this process as inventing a landscape: “To invent a landscape is to order the
natural terrain, or to impose organizing divisions on it, so that it becomes a human
creation; it means that people live in a constructed or bounded landscape that affects
the ways they feed, clothe, and shelter themselves.”

John Hines has thus attempted
to explore the later Anglo-Saxon poem known as Guthlac A to find evidence for
processes of land acquisition. However, this approach can also be usefully applied to

133 Siewers, “Landscapes of Conversion,” p. 39. Corpses and ancestral spirits are notably absent from
both Guthlac’s mound and the dragon’s barrow in Beowulf.


62-70. Moreland has critiqued Hines for undervaluing the productivity of his texts. J. Moreland, “Historical
Felix’s *Life of Saint Guthlac*. With regard to the processes of inventing or organizing the landscape contemporary to Felix, Moreland has argued that charters were the dominant means of asserting land acquisition: “They were tools, essential elements, in that process and in the capturing of resources from the landscape. As such, they contributed to the construction of the community that created them.”¹³⁷ Thus it is worth interrogating the *Life of Saint Guthlac* for echoes of cartulary practices.¹³⁸

Although cartulary evidence from the 8th century is admittedly incomplete – not a single charter survives bearing the name of Ælfwald, Felix’s purported sponsor, for example¹³⁹ – at least one surviving charter does suggest a remarkable association with the *Life of Saint Guthlac*. This charter, known as Birch 154 (Sawyer 89), is a grant of land by King Æthelbald of Mercia to an Earl Cyniberht for the construction of a monastery in Worcester in 736.¹⁴⁰ Not only does this charter chronologically fall near the date of likely composition for the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, its witness list also contains many names which appear in Felix’s text: Æthelbald, Wilfrid, Offa, and Cissa. Aside from Æthelbald, who is clearly identified as the king of Mercia in both texts, the double

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¹³⁸ Della Hooke surveyed the 470 pre-Conquest documents from the West Midlands, including Birch 154, discussed below. She observed that the initial precedents for cartulary formulae – including an emphasis on recording landmarks – were typically derived from Roman law, formulae became increasingly sophisticated over time. D. Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: The Kingdom of the Hwicce* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 50-52. It therefore seemed best to select a near contemporary charter for comparison.

¹³⁹ This is most likely due to the pervasive loss of documents from eastern England due to Danish invasions. D. Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1997), pp. 85-86.

¹⁴⁰ *Cartularium Saxonicum: A Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History*, 154, ed. Walter de Gray Birch, 3 vols (London, 1885) [hereafter Birch]. Charters are more commonly referred to by their various catalogue numbers. Thus Birch (or CS) 154 is also Sawyer 89 and Kemble 80.
appearance of the other names may be mere coincidence. \footnote{141} Nevertheless, given the
date of the charter and the names of those present, it is tempting to imagine that this
charter recorded a gathering of those who may have known Guthlac, either to provide
Felix with information or to hear a reading of his finished text.

More importantly, this charter allows a comparison between how the landscape
was invented – in the sense proposed by Howe – in both hagiographic and cartulary
terms. The charter recorded:

\begin{quote}
I, Æthelbald, . . . hand over to the possession of the church with lavish
generosity some small part of land, that is, 10 hides, to my venerable
companion Cyniberht for the construction of a monastery in the province
that since antiquity has had the name Husmere, near the river called Stur,
with all the essentials that pertain to it, with fields and forests, with fishing
and meadows. . . . The said estate is bounded (\textit{in circuitu est}) on two sides
of the said river, having on its northern side the forest which they call
Cynibre and on the east another whose name is Moerheb, the greatest part
of which pertains to the estate above. \footnote{142}
\end{quote}

The terms of this charter articulated possession of the landscape in three ways. First,
the author named the estate, in this case Husmere. The author then enumerated the
resources belonging to the estate: fields, forests, fishing, and meadows. Finally, the
author described the bounds of the estate in terms of natural features and named

\footnote{141} Felix described \textit{Wilfridus} as an abbot; here \textit{Uuilfridus} is identified as a bishop. He described \textit{Oba} as a
\textit{comes} of Æthelbald; the same name \textit{Oba} appears here. He described \textit{Cissa} as a priest, but he appears
here without any additional appellation. Several of these names appear elsewhere – see especially Birch
149, 150, 157, and 163 – which may indicate continued relationships or promotions over time.

\footnote{142} \textit{Ego Aethilbalt . . . aliquam terrae particulam id est . x . cassatorum venerando comite meo Cyniberhtte
ad construendum coenubium in provincia cui ab antiquis nomen inditum est Husmerae . juxta fluvium
vocabulo Stur , cum omnibus necessariis ad eam pertinentibus cum campis silvisque cum piscaris
pratisque in possessionem ecclesiasticam benigne largiendo trado. Ita ut quandiu vixerit potestatem
habeat tenendi ac possidendi cuicumque voluerit vel eo vivo vel certe post obitum suum relinquendi, est
autem supradictus ager in circuitu ex utraque parte suprannotini fluminis habens ex aquilone plaga
silvam quam nominant cynibre ex occidentale vero aliam cui nome est moerheb quarum pars maxima ad
praefatum pertinet agrum.} Birch 154.
Thus Birch 154 used both boundaries and an impressionistic description of the bounded area to express the acquisition of landscape resources as a plot of land. Although the terms of charters varied and generally became more elaborate through the Anglo-Saxon period, the identification of these elements in a charter roughly contemporaneous to the Life of Saint Guthlac – especially a charter that may have been witnessed by persons Felix claimed to know – provides the best possible baseline for comparing Felix’s approach to the landscape to cartulary practices.

Felix’s description of the Fenland bears remarkable similarity to the description of the Husmere estate in Birch 154:

There is in the Midland parts of Britain a most dark swamp of immense size, which begins by the banks of the River Granta (Cam) not far from the fortification called Gronte (Cambridge). Here in pools, there in muddy spots, sometimes with waters that are black with flowing fog, and often punctuated with islands and woods in the twisting turns of little streams, it extends in a lengthy tract from the south as far north as the sea.

First, Felix identified the area of his description as the immense swamp in the Midlands near the River Cam. Then he elaborated on the components of its landscape: pools, mud flats, foggy waters, wooded islands, and twisting streams. Finally, he completed its boundaries: from the river Granta extending northward to the sea, that is, stretching from Cambridge to the Wash. This description of the landscape, therefore, contains all the same elements as Birch 154 and thus seems entirely in accord with contemporary

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143 Hooke has emphasized the importance of boundaries in Anglo-Saxon charters. Hooke, The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England, pp. 84-101.
144 Hooke, The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England, pp. 84-87.
145 *Est in meditullaneis Britannieae partibus inmensae magnitudinis aterrima* [the majority reading is acerimma] palus quae, a Grontae fluminis ripis incipiens, haud procul a castello quem dicunt nomine Gronte, nunc stagnis, nunc flactris, interdum nigris [or nigr] fusi vaporis laticibus, necnon et crebris insularum nemorumque intervenientibus flexuosis [or flexosis] rivigarum anfractibus, ab austro in aquilonem mare tenus longissimo tractu pretenditur. VG, Ch. 24.
cartulary practice. Furthermore, there is nothing particularly dangerous or dismal about this description, aside from two passing references to its darkness.\textsuperscript{146} For Felix, this description of the Fens seems to have been little more than business as usual.

Indeed, Felix subsequently confirmed that he conceived of the Fens as an estate to be occupied by Guthlac. Following his description of the Fens, Felix reported that Guthlac explored the area.\textsuperscript{147} Later Anglo-Saxon charters indicate that a physical reconnaissance of the chartered estate was an integral part of the cartulary process.\textsuperscript{148} The tracing of boundaries and inventory of resources evident in both Birch 154 and Felix’s description of the Fens seem to indicate that this practice may have already been current in the early 8th century. If so, it was a necessary prerequisite to settlement, and indeed, Felix immediately thereafter described Guthlac as a settler: “No settler had been able to inhabit it alone before Guthlac the servant of Christ.”\textsuperscript{149} Felix borrowed this passage almost verbatim from Bede’s \textit{Life of Saint Cuthbert},\textsuperscript{150} indicating that he considered the word choice to be particularly apt for a saint establishing a hermitage. Following this reconnaissance of the Fens, Guthlac formally departed from his monastery, and then, as Felix recorded: “He returned to the said place from whence he had come, as if to the home inherited from his father.”\textsuperscript{151} These passages, which

\textsuperscript{146} If \textit{aterrima palus} could be taken as a Latinized proper name, the reference to black waters may only be an explanatory note, rather than a stigmatization of the landscape.

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{VG}, Ch. 25.

\textsuperscript{148} Hooke, \textit{The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England}, pp. 90-91.

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{VG}, Ch. 25.

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{VCPr}, Ch. 26.

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Ad supradictum locum, quasi ad paternae hereditatis habitaculum, . . . regressus est}. \textit{VG}, Ch. 26. This is an original passage by Felix, evidencing no textual borrowing.
Downey characterized as a “progressive retreat to Crowland,”\textsuperscript{152} may conversely be understood as Felix’s effort to legitimize Guthlac’s occupation of the Fens. Felix heightened this impression of Guthlac as the sole rightful owner by repeatedly describing the Fens as an otherwise uncultivated wilderness and asserting that Guthlac dwelled there alone.\textsuperscript{153} In this sense, the later demonic assaults may be seen as a violation of Guthlac’s property rights. Thus St. Bartholomew appeared to recover Guthlac from his tormentors and return him to “his place.”\textsuperscript{154} Felix thus used techniques from cartulary practice to justify Guthlac’s habitation of the Fens, in contrast to the demons for whom he presented no legitimizing claim. Cartulary practice, therefore, seems to have provided the fundamental basis for Felix’s understanding and description of the landscape in these passages.

Given Felix’s use of cartulary conventions, it is useful to investigate how charters functioned as essential elements for organizing the landscape during the long 8th century. As documents that established and defined the locations and boundaries of estates, charters facilitated stable patterns of occupation that could endure across generations. Charters can thus be reasonably connected to the stabilization of

\textsuperscript{152} Downey, “Intertextuality in the Lives of St. Guthlac,” p. 103.

\textsuperscript{153} From chapter 24, where Felix first described the Fens, to chapter 28, where Guthlac established his hermitage on the mound, Felix used the word desert (heremus) twelve times, uncultivated (incultus) three times, variants of inhabit (habitare, inhabitare, habitaculum) nine times, and variants of alone (solus, solitudinis, solitaria) nine times. He further emphasized the importance of these words by placing them in frequent proximity to each other. For example: “Crowland . . . had been known to few and hardly cultivated on account of the very remote solitude of the desert (Crugland . . . propter remotioris heremi solitudinem inculta vix nota habeatur).” VG, Ch. 24-28.

\textsuperscript{154} locum suum. VG, Ch. 32.
settlement patterns that occurred during the long 8th century.\footnote{155} Beginning in the late 7th century, these stable settlements emerged, corresponding to an intensification of agriculture and production.\footnote{156} Moreland has argued that these changes likely began in the countryside – perhaps to meet the needs of ecclesiastical communities – establishing patterns of agricultural production that could sustain the growth of towns and provide a power base for aspiring kings.\footnote{157} Although Moreland acknowledged that the available evidence does not support a precise chronology, he suggested that settlements stabilized and economic production intensified before 700, but that the trading towns known as \textit{wics} did not emerge as centers of commodity production and exchange until around 720.\footnote{158} Thus by the time Felix wrote the \textit{Life of Saint Guthlac} around 730, the landscape had recently undergone dramatic changes, beginning with the transition from shifting settlements to stable towns around 700. During this time, charters had emerged as an important documentary means for fixing human patterns of occupation upon the landscape.

As a conventional organizational method, then, charters gradually came to supersede the organizational function of ancestral cemeteries. Whereas mounds and other ancestral places had earlier functioned as reference points for a shifting landscape, mounds lost this functional purpose as settlements stabilized during the

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\footnote{155} {It became common practice in England to record land transfers with charters beginning in the late 7th century. Hooke, \textit{The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England}, p. 10. Whether charters were descriptive of or prescriptive for producing a stable order is, however, beyond the scope of the present discussion.}

\footnote{156} {In addition to the evidence of increasing production and stabilizing settlements, Hamerow has connected the intensification of agricultural production with “new house types, new forms and greater numbers of crop-storage facilities, and changes in the layout of farmsteads and villages, particularly during the eighth and ninth centuries.” Hamerow, \textit{Early Medieval Settlements}, pp. 124, 139.}

\footnote{157} {Moreland, “The Significance of Production,” pp. 231-32.}

\footnote{158} {Moreland, “The Significance of Production,” p. 215.}
course of the long 8th century.\textsuperscript{159} This loss of purpose may have facilitated the abandonment of ancestral cemeteries for churchyard burials that began with an almost universal cessation of furnished burials around 720. This change is most often interpreted in terms of the stabilization of social structures rather than changes in settlement patterns.\textsuperscript{160} However, an alternate explanation may be that once ancestral estates came to fulfill the organizing role that ancestral cemeteries had earlier provided for shifting settlements, ancestral cemeteries could be abandoned allowing the adoption of churchyard burial.\textsuperscript{161} Regardless of the process of change, however, the practical effect of the changed burial patterns was that burial monuments lost their significance for organizing human behavior in the landscape at the same time that charters emerged as a pervasive means of landscape organization.

These changes were still in process as Felix wrote the \textit{Life of Saint Guthlac}. Charters had become a significant means for organizing the landscape, and this means of organization is uniquely reflected in his description of the Fens. Felix’s adoption of cartulary conventions may reflect the legal experience often acquired by ecclesiastical...

\textsuperscript{159} Ingold has usefully categorized various models of territoriality, or behavior that expresses inhabitation of the landscape. He described transient behavior organized around significant points in the landscape as a zero-dimensional form of tenure. This could include the shifting settlements of 5th-through 7th-century England, oriented on places of ancestral presence such as burial mounds. Ingold described stable behavior based on continuous possession of defined plots of land as a two-dimensional form of tenure. This model accords with the 7th-century stabilization of Anglo-Saxon settlements and use of charters to define bounded plots. See Ingold, “Territoriality and Tenure,” pp. 130-31, 147-57.

\textsuperscript{160} Geake has provided the most thorough analysis of the cessation of furnished burial and has surveyed influential interpretations. Geake, \textit{Use of Grave-Goods}, p. 134. Guy Halsall’s studies of mound burials in Gaul and their relationship to times of social instability have been an influential point of reference. See for example, Halsall, “Social Change around A.D. 600,” pp. 265-78.

\textsuperscript{161} No single explanation has been convincingly offered for the adoption of unfurnished churchyard burial. Geake, \textit{The Use of Grave-Goods}, pp. 134-35.
scribes. The description he provided of the Fenland landscape thus resonated with a number of material practices – settlement patterns, the intensification of agriculture and production, and the abandonment of ancestral burials – that served to erase the significance of mounds as places of permanent ancestral community.

Semple studied this especially in 10th- and 11th-century England. Semple, "Illustrations of Damnation," p. 244. However, the witness lists from charters such as Birch 154 indicate a significant ecclesiastical presence during the production of charters began at a much earlier date.
Although burial mounds were later considered dangerous symbols in Christian cosmology, Christianization did not automatically render these places dangerous. On the contrary, Felix’s *Life of Saint Guthlac* indicates that mounds retained their pre-Christian significance well into the Christian period. This significance derived primarily from material practices that engaged mounds first as prehistoric monuments that could be used to organize the landscape as reference markers. The early Anglo-Saxons invested these mounds with meaning by collocating ancestral cemeteries at these sites. These sites therefore came to represent a seeming permanence in contrast to the shifting nature of settlements during the early Anglo-Saxon period. They served as a stable foundation to express community identity and organize relationships between people and the world around them in both space and time. Through these material practices, mounds came to symbolize ancestral presence, permanence, and community identity.

In the *Life of Saint Guthlac*, Felix acknowledged these aspects of pre-Christian mound use by placing the image of a mound at the critical point in his text. Felix’s artful use of intertextual references in the prologue indicated that he was aware of and skilled at structuring borrowed passages into a text that would be meaningful to a highly sophisticated Anglo-Latin audience. Thus Felix’s placement of the mound at the midpoint of his narrative structure, which he emphasized both by placing it at the center of a sequence taken from the *Life of Saint Antony* and by alerting the reader that a new narrative had thus begun, should not be dismissed as an unintentional accident. Instead, it should highlight Felix’s intention to draw upon the significance of mounds in
the very episode that marked Guthlac’s transformation from a dynamic historical individual into a universalized model of sainthood. Felix used Guthlac’s arrival at the mound to symbolize his transition into a saint, characterized by timeless miracles borrowed from earlier hagiographic texts and thus a member of the textual communion of saints established through hagiographic practice. This use of the mound thus represents a uniquely Christian appropriation of pre-Christian associations of mounds with spiritual forebears, permanence, and community identity.

At the same time, however, the Life of Saint Guthlac also evidenced new approaches to the landscape that obviated the material practices that had earlier invested mounds with meaning. Felix produced an image of the Fenland landscape that resonated strongly with contemporary charters. As seen in the example cited above, Felix shared in the cartulary practices of organizing the landscape by naming an area, describing its resources, and defining its boundaries. Cartulary practices contributed to the stabilization of the landscape by organizing settlements around established plots of land. Over the course of the long 8th century, this approach to the landscape came to supersede the earlier organization around significant points such as mounds with ancestral cemeteries. In conjunction with the transition to unfurnished churchyard burial that began around 720, this new organization of the landscape interrupted the practices that had earlier invested mounds with meaning. Mounds were no longer needed as organizing foci, which meant that ancestral cemeteries could be relocated to new places of Christian significance.

The Life of Saint Guthlac thus holds two distinct modes of organizing the landscape in tension. On the one hand, Felix drew upon the pre-Christian traditions of
burial that made mounds into symbols of ancestral presence, permanence, and community identity. On the other, Felix approached the landscape in cartulary terms, indicating a new landscape organization that no longer depended upon ancestral cemeteries as the primary tool used to organize the landscape. As the latter mode of organization came to dominate the landscape during the long 8th century and the former mode was forgotten, Guthlac’s mound must have become a perplexing image for later Anglo-Saxons. Once mounds lost their pre-Christian practical significance in the landscape, the saint’s occupation of the mound in the Life of Saint Guthlac lost the meaning Felix had ascribed. To later readers, Guthlac’s occupation of the mound may have made sense only in the context of a direct assault on the demonic forces that Felix described in the Fens and that repeatedly attempted to drive Guthlac from his hermitage in subsequent chapters.¹ By placing the inoperative symbol of a mound in the midst of this thoroughly Christian cosmology, Felix produced the possibility that mounds would become a place of demons and danger. Ironically, although Felix contributed to establishing this relationship between mounds and demons, he did so only because mounds were not yet dangerous places but were instead ideal places for holy men to become saints.

¹ Thus Aggeler interpreted Felix’s Guthlac as a unique example of “the hermit as militant aggressor.” Aggeler, “Reinventing the Holy Man,” p. 52.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Matthew Delvaux completed his undergraduate degree in 2006 from the United States Military Academy at West Point. He received a Bachelors of Science in European history and foreign languages (German and French). His undergraduate thesis, “Out of Chaos and Night: The German Officer Corps and the Revolution of 1918,” was recognized by the Department of History with the Nye Award for Excellence in Research in Military Affairs. Upon graduation, Matthew was commissioned as an armor officer in the United States Army. He was stationed at Fort Wainwright and assigned to the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division. As an infantry platoon leader with Delta Company, 52nd Infantry Regiment (Anti-Tank), he deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom 08-09 and was stationed in Diyala Province. Upon redeployment to Fort Wainwright, he was assigned as the logistics officer for 5th Squadron, 1st U.S. Cavalry, facilitating training for a subsequent deployment. Mathew left active service in 2011 to pursue an academic career. He began study of medieval history at the University of Florida in August of that year. His graduate coursework has included classes in history, classics, and anthropology. He also participated in the UF 2012 Medieval Archaeology Field Practicum, excavating the site of an Iron-Age settlement at Uppåkra, Sweden. His course of study is directed toward receiving a masters’ degree in European history and a certificate in medieval archaeology.