

## Healing words: St Guthlac and the trauma of war

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Anglo-Saxon poetry is often discussed in terms of heroic exploits. Much of it is associated with a specific way of life—the life of an aristocratic warrior. While not every Anglo-Saxon noble may have seen a tour of battle, the accoutrements of war were clearly regarded as important for the forming of identities. What is discussed less is that many poems also ponder the aftermath of war. Thus we find *The Wanderer* who had to bury his lord, an exile who supported the wrong leader and now finds himself without a sympathetic ear, destitute and hungry. While these poems are multifaceted, often juxtaposing earthly exile against heavenly home, they clearly mirrored the experiences and fears of their audience to some extent. Although physical injury is generally not a subject of these texts, they still conjure up the terrors of battle. For instance, the poem of the *Battle of Maldon*, which depicts a defeat of the Anglo-Saxon army by a group of Vikings in AD 991, narrates that when the leader died and the battle looked hopeless, some of the soldiers fled the battlefield (ll. 185 - 197).<sup>2</sup> Anglo-Saxon soldiers will have returned home broken in body and spirit from the various battlefields of this period. These men (and women, too, who were also victims of war) were marked by traumatic experiences, and there is a question if literature addressed this part of the heroic life as well.

In this essay I will argue that trauma is not just present in Old English literature, but that there may have also been texts which explicitly address it. These texts do not just describe traumatic experiences that the audience has experienced, they also offer potential ways of healing, or at least living with trauma, through the examples of those who have lived

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<sup>2</sup> D. Scragg, ed., *The Battle of Maldon AD 991*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 24-5.

through it and received some form of cure. Mental health in Anglo-Saxon England is still an under-researched field. Much of what has been discussed has focussed on religion, especially demon possession.<sup>3</sup> Cures in these texts inevitably come from saints or their representatives, and many of the examples are very unspecific.

In this essay I will specifically look at the seventh-century Mercian noble St Guthlac, who enjoyed great popularity during the Anglo-Saxon period. Traditionally Guthlac is seen as a warrior saint, and scholarship has focussed on his conversion from soldier to saint. Guthlac is not the only soldier to become a saint in Old English literature: we have prominent saints such as St Martin who ‘wæs gewenod to wæpnum fram cild-hade...’ [accustomed to weapons from childhood].<sup>4</sup> Whereas St Martin does not take up weapons when he marches with the soldiers, because he would rather like to be in a monastery, this is different for Guthlac. Felix spends quite a bit of time on describing Guthlac’s life before his decision to leave active service for a life serving God. Guthlac’s remorse and the focus on his long penance in the wilderness, where he is plagued by repeat attacks from demons and supernatural forces sets him aside from the usual *martyrium* endured by holy men and women.

Religious writings make ample use of illness and impairment, and it should not surprise that religious texts are full of examples of the most gruesome illnesses and terrible afflictions. There is no healthy state of human existence in this life *per se*, since the body is frail and mortal and the only place where the body is perfect is in Heaven. Illness, according to the Church Fathers, is the result of distance from God, a spiritual ailment that God alone can conquer.<sup>5</sup> Despite this rather bleak outlook the church also promised healing, or at least

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<sup>3</sup> Good examples are Peter Dendle’s *Demon Possession in Anglo-Saxon England* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> W. Skeat ed and trans: *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*, 2 vols, EETS OS 94, 119 (London: OUP, 1966), I: 60.

<sup>5</sup> A. Crislip, *Thorns in the Flesh: Illness and Sanctity in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2013), p. 20.

alleviation through intercession from saints, which is why sickness often dominates this genre. Sickness is often just a prelude to eternal health. In the worldview of the Anglo-Saxon church suffering in this life shortened the potential pains of the next, and in the case of saints persecution, torture and death allowed them to go straight to Heaven. Thus suffering is part for the course and should be born with acceptance. Most patristic and Anglo-Saxon saints bear their torments, which are often brief and fairly glossed over, with stoic acceptance, but Guthlac's pains are vivid, and, in some cases, such as the poem of *Guthlac B*, he is shown wearied by his prolonged suffering. Normally Anglo-Saxon writers are not much interested in the life before sainthood, and many are depicted as pious, but Guthlac had a life before his sainthood in which he had been involved in war and slaughter.

There are several literary versions of Guthlac's life and death: the first Felix's Latin *Vita*, written on request of King Ælfwald of East Anglia, in the eighth century. No fewer than thirteen manuscripts of this text survive, although some of them in a fragmentary form.<sup>6</sup> An Old English prose translation of Felix's *Vita* survives in a late eleventh, early twelfth manuscript BL, Cotton Vespasian D xxi, fol 18-40,<sup>7</sup> but may be much earlier, possibly early in the tenth century,<sup>8</sup> and perhaps as early as the reign of King Alfred (AD 871-899).<sup>9</sup> The final homily in the tenth-century Vercelli codex has also been identified to be based on Felix's *Vita*.<sup>10</sup> The homily uses some different materials of the Guthlac legend, which may be additional narratives which were available to the writer.<sup>11</sup> There are two Old English verse versions: *Guthlac A* and *B*, both compiled in the tenth-century Exeter Book, a collection of poems and riddles, which was produced for the first bishop of Exeter, Leofric, and

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<sup>6</sup> Roberts, 'An Inventory', 194.

<sup>7</sup> *The Production and Use of English Manuscripts 1066- 1220* database: <https://www.le.ac.uk/english/em1060to1220/mss/EM.BL.Vesp.D.xxi.htm> [accessed 30 March 2016].

<sup>8</sup> J. Roberts, 'The Old English Prose Translation of Felix's *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*', *Studies in Earlier English Prose*, ed. P. Szarmach (New York, 1986), 363- 379, at 369.

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, 'Inventory', 202.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>11</sup> Roberts, 'Inventory', 203.

bequeathed to the Cathedral library where it is still today.<sup>12</sup> In this compilation the poem is placed in a group of religious poems, notably *Christ III*, which considers the Second Coming and *Azarias*, a poem associated with one of the youths in the fiery furnace from the biblical Daniel. Neither of the Guthlac poems are complete, since their original manuscript is lost; there is speculation that at least *Guthlac B* may have been composed by the renowned Anglo-Saxon poet Cynewulf and is strongly influenced by chapter 50 of Felix's *Vita*.<sup>13</sup>

Not much is known about the historical Guthlac, who lived between AD 672/673 and AD714,<sup>14</sup> other than appearing as a witness on a charter dated to AD 691/2.<sup>15</sup> The surviving literary representations all have a different slant, focussing on martyrdom through temptation and despair and subsequent redemption (Felix's *Vita S Guthlaci*), the promises of heaven and how to attain them (*Guthlac A*) and resilience and healing (*Guthlac B*). Central to all of them is Guthlac, a warrior who has exchanged arms for the life of a religious and who has to endure many struggles to gain peace.

In the earliest version, Felix's *Vita*, Guthlac of Croyland (Crowland) after a life in military service takes holy orders at the double monastery of Repton and after a period of instruction, retires to a grave mound/wilderness in the fens of Cambridgeshire. The narrative is clearly influenced by popular monastic legends, such as St Anthony and other desert saints and the necessity for the faithful to endure their *martyrium*.<sup>16</sup> Evidence for the historical Guthlac is rather slim. Ian Thompson speculates that he may have been witness to a palace intrigue in the royal Mercian house,<sup>17</sup> but this is not mentioned in any of the sources. Unlike

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<sup>12</sup> G. P. Krapp and E. v. K. Dobbie eds, *The Exeter Book*. The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III (London/ New York: Routledge, 1936).

<sup>13</sup> F. M. Biggs, 'Unities in the Old English *Guthlac B*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 89 (1990), 155-165, at 155. For the *Vercelli Homily* see Homily XXIII in: *The Vercelli Homilies* ed. D. Scragg, EETS O.S. 300 (Oxford: OUP, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> I. Thompson, *Felix, St Guthlac, and the Early History of Crowland* (Scunthorpe: Bluestone, 2008), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> J. Roberts, 'An Inventory of Early Guthlac Materials', *Medieval Studies* 32 (1970), 193-233, at 219.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Weston points out that the decision to retire to the wilderness of the fens may have been influenced by Guthlac's reading of the *Life of St Anthony*; 'Betwixt and Between: Literacy, Cross-Temporal Affiliation, and an Anglo-Saxon Anchorite', *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 42 (2016), pp. 1-27, at p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> B. Colgrave ed & trans, *Felix's Life of St Guthlac* (Cambridge: CUP, 1956), p. 3.

other saints, whose suffering and asceticism may be hard to emulate, there is a very ‘real’ aspect to Guthlac’s life which could mirror the experiences of the audience, if we take away living in a grave and dressing entirely in skins. The fact that Guthlac was an active soldier and a member of the elite, makes him an ideal role model for a warrior class. Felix’s *Vita* of Guthlac is a narrative which explicitly addresses the trauma and especially the trauma suffered through engagement in war and battle, which may describe experiences that his audience were very familiar with.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is normally discussed in connection with modern conflict, but rarely applied to the past. The criteria for the diagnosis of PTSD are defined as a result of ‘... exposure, to actual or threatened death, serious injury ...’.<sup>18</sup> This is certainly the case for Guthlac, who experiences a range of different life-threatening encounters during his time in the fens. More importantly, the reason for his seclusion is induced by the remorse he feels after his own involvement in killing. Still: we need to be very careful not to impose modern interpretations on medieval narratives. There is good cautionary advice to stay away from retrospective diagnoses, but the lack of discussion of trauma in the medieval period also mirrors our perception of the period as a time in which every-day barbarism is expected, which is quite evident from the uses of ‘medieval’ in all kinds of contemporary discourses about Daesh, as well as in the descriptors used for modern atrocities. In the ‘medieval’ world of torture and slaughter it is often assumed that people had no capacity for empathy or remorse. There have, however, been few efforts to understand how medieval people dealt with violence and trauma and people have not looked very far. It is not as if poems such as *The Wanderer* or *Beowulf* are silent about the plight of those who

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<sup>18</sup> As defined by the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder* cited by C. L. May and B. Wisco, ‘Defining Trauma: How Level of Exposure and Proximity Affect Risk for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder’, *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research Practice and Policy* (2016), pp. 233-240, at p. 234. See also: J. D. Ford, D. Grasso, J.D. Elhai and C.A. Courtois, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Amsterdam: Elsevier imprint, 2015).

have survived conflict, and in the case of the former the mental turmoil of those who survived are clearly described; it is more that scholars chose to look away and focus on heroic death instead.

Hunt points out that there have been no scientific studies of PTSD before the nineteenth century and that the vocabulary is therefore very recent.<sup>19</sup> We need to understand how medieval people talked about mental illness. Similarly, Western trauma theories have been accused of being ‘imperialist’.<sup>20</sup> Definitions of trauma have largely been made on the basis of twentieth-century European experiences. Expressions of grief and healing solutions are culture-specific and we are only slowly learning the vocabulary of early medieval grief. How did Anglo-Saxon society cope with conflict, which was relatively frequent? Trauma, as Michael Rothberg writes, needs survivors. The dead cannot be traumatised.<sup>21</sup>

Although Anglo-Saxon England had a military organisation in the *fyrð*, it was mostly an army of conscripts under the leadership of noblemen – free men could be called upon to serve their local leaders, especially after the reforms of King Alfred in AD 878 when half of the men were supposed to be engaged in military service while the other half was at home tending to their homesteads.<sup>22</sup> Aristocratic men were supposed to lead military campaigns, unless they chose a religious life. So while we may argue that many men were brought up with the expectation to be involved in combat, we should also consider that not everyone had been trained to deal with the aftermath of slaughter.

The narrative of Felix’s *Vita* is essentially about regret and redemption through overcoming demons – real or imagined. Nigel Hunt writes that millions of civilians in the

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<sup>19</sup> *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> S. Craps, ‘Beyond Eurocriticism: Trauma theory in the global age’, in: G. Beulens, S. Durrant and R. Eaglestone eds., *The Future of Trauma Theory: contemporary literary and cultural criticism* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 45-61, at pp. 48-9.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Preface’ in: G. Beulens, *et al.*, p. xiv.

<sup>22</sup> For a good overview of the *fyrð* in pre- and post-Alfredian organisation see: John Baker and Stuart Brook, ‘Explaining Anglo-Saxon military efficiency: the landscape of mobilization’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 44(2016), pp. 221- 58.

twentieth century were affected by war, and many had to live with the psychological consequences of the memory of torture, massacre, death of others, starvation, exile and rape.<sup>23</sup> He continues that there are thousands of millions of perpetrators whose voices are rarely heard, but that they, too lived with the memory of what they did.<sup>24</sup> In many ways Guthlac is one of them. Guthlac, whose name Felix explains as *belli mundus* ‘rewards of war’,<sup>25</sup> is inspired by heroes of old and is engaged in a nine-year campaign in western Mercia. Felix writes:

Et cum adversantium sibi urbes et villas, vicos et castella igne ferroque vastaret, conrasis undique diversarum gentium sociis, immensas praedas gregasset, tunc velut ex divino consilio edoctus tertiam partem adgregatae gazae possidentibus remittebat.

...

[but when he had devastated the towns and residences of his foes, their villages and fortresses with fire and sword, and gathering together companions from various races and from all directions, had amassed immense booty, then as if instructed by divine counsel, he would return to the owners a third part of the treasure collected.]<sup>26</sup>

While it is Felix intention to underline the magnanimity of St Guthlac, he also clearly shows a man who is riddled by guilt. Felix continues to describe how Guthlac after the

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<sup>23</sup> N. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Colgrave ed & trans, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, 80. The name is a compound of Old English *gud* ‘war/battle’ and *lac* ‘gift/ sacrifice’, but Felix may not have been familiar with Anglo-Saxon naming practices. Felix narrates in chap x that he was named after his tribe, the ‘Guthlacingas’. Paul Cavill writes that the meaning of the name is problematic and does not correspond to vernacular naming patterns. He offers a detailed study of the name, including a discussion of Fred Robinson’s exegetical reading in which the name foreshadows his future gifts. The fact that Guthlac’s name was read proleptic may indicate the importance of his cult and his association with desert saints; ‘The Naming of Guthlac’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 59 (2015), pp. 25-47.

<sup>26</sup> Colgrave ed & trans, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, p. 80. Translation by Colgrave.

turmoil of war, pillage and devastation that is wreaked by the opposing side is embroiled in the gloomy mists of his life, thrown into the surging whirlpool of his time: ‘... atras caliginosae vitae nebulas, fluctuantes inter saeculi gurgites iactaretur, ...’.<sup>27</sup> Pondering on his own mortality and the vanity of the world he decides to abandon his military life and take up a religious life at the age of 24. During his two years of instruction he is part of a community – embedded in a life of spiritual comfort. It is only after he goes into the wilderness that he has to face a new hostile foe, which continues an extension of his previous life as a warrior, only that he is referred to as *Christi militis*.<sup>28</sup> The vocabulary is that of battle; he is armed with ‘the shield of faith, breastplate of hope, helmet of chastity, bow of patience and arrows of psalmody’.<sup>29</sup> While alone he is assaulted by despair, which is induced through the memory of his previous sins: ‘Nam cum sua ante commisa criminal inmensi ponderis fuisse mediabatur, tunc sibi de se ablui ea non posse videbatur’ [For when he remembered that the sins he had committed in the past were of immense weight, it seemed to him that he could not be cleansed from them].<sup>30</sup> He receives respite through singing and the intervention of St Bartholomew. St Bartholomew plays a major role in Felix’s narrative – not only does Guthlac arrive in his exile on his feast day, but he also eventually helps him to heal. The choice of Bartholomew is interesting here, since he is elsewhere associated with healing in other Anglo-Saxon texts, most notably in Ælfric’s homily.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, Guthlac faces his demons alone but it is through community with the saint that he receives respite from his torments. One of the ways in which survivors of PTSD can build up resilience is through self and group narratives.<sup>32</sup> The role of literature in the

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<sup>27</sup> Colgrave ed & trans, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> Colgrave ed & trans, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Colgrave ed & trans, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> Colgrave ed, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Passio Sancto Batholomei Apostoli’, in: P. Clemoes ed, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies* Ælfric (Oxford: OUP, 1997) uses the well-known figure of St Bartholomew and his travels to India to ponder on the causes of illness and false healing.

<sup>32</sup> Hunt, *Memory*, p. 92.

healing of PTSD has been largely ignored,<sup>33</sup> but recent work on descriptions of the experiences of Achilles in the *Iliad* has led to renewed interest by therapists.<sup>34</sup> If literature can unlock memories which traumatised veterans try to avoid, may it also be used as a form of healing? Guthlac's demons range from devils who reason with him about fasting and abstinence to abhorrent creatures who attack Guthlac in his abode. Their terrifying shapes, with large heads, long necks, yellow complexions and filthy beards,<sup>35</sup> thick lips, are a distortion of the human form: the sallow skin of disease, the swollen lips of fights and the singed hair may be seen as the distortions visited on the dead and maimed in war. These demons are not just terrifying to see, they also are intent on physical harm: they burst into his home, plunge him into muddy waters, tear at his limbs. He is whipped and beaten and he is taken away to meet more enemies, until he is finally shown a vision of hell.<sup>36</sup> His ordeal is both terrifying and painful.

Guthlac is healed through saintly intercession – just when he is about to be cast into the abyss he is helped by St Bartholomew, but his ordeal is not over. Following the demonic hosts he is confronted with his former enemies whom he recognises by their language:

[...] nam ille aliorum temporum praeteritis voluminibus inter illos exulabat,  
quoadusque eorum strimulentas loquelas intelligere valuit. Nec mora; per palustria  
tectis subvenire certantes, eodem paene momento omnes domus suas flamma  
superante ardere conspicit; illum quoque intercipientes acutis hastarum spiculis in  
auras levare coeperunt.

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<sup>33</sup> Hunt, *Memory*, p. 161.

<sup>34</sup> P. Birmes, L. Hatton, A. Brunet, L. Schmitt, 'Early historical literature for post-traumatic symptomatology', *Stress and Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress*, 19:1 (2003), 17–26.

<sup>35</sup> Colgrave ed, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, 102.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 102- 106.

[for in years gone by he had been an exile among them, so that he was to understand their sibilant speech. Straightaway they strove to approach his dwelling through the marshes, and at almost the same moment he saw all his buildings burning, the flames mounting upwards; indeed they caught him too and began to lift him into the air on sharp points of their spears. ... (trans. Colgrave)]<sup>37</sup>

This passage is the first time that we are told about Guthlac's involvement with this group of people - there is no mention of a British encounter before—and it is the clearest indication that he suffered some kind of trauma during his exile, which he is now forced to relive. It is also the clearest indication that he may be suffering from PTSD, triggered by noises which he understands to be the speech of his former enemy. This time he has no help from a saint, but instead is saved by reciting Psalm 67,<sup>38</sup> which calls unto God to scatter the enemies of David and to blow them away like smoke – which seems to be a reference to the burning buildings that he has seen. Whereas the first incidence may be described as a vision, the second instance is a very real threat. There has been discussion about the nature of Guthlac's demons - whether they were 'real' or aspects of his consciousness.<sup>39</sup> Thomas Hill states this debate misses the point since 'demons are an aspect of spiritual reality which impinges most significantly upon our consciousness'.<sup>40</sup> The memory of exile among the enemies and the images of the savagery of an invading army are clearly based on experiences in war.

Guthlac's third encounter with evil demons manifests itself in a herd of wild animals. Oxen, wolves, snakes and bears attack the *Dei verum militem* 'true soldier of Christ'.<sup>41</sup> The *miles Christi*, however, is different from the soldier who entered the wilderness. Guthlac

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<sup>37</sup> Colgrave ed, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, 110.

<sup>38</sup> 68 in most modern editions following the Masoretic text.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion see T. Hill, 'The Middle Way: Idel-Wuldor and Egesa in the Old English Guthlac A', *The Review of English Studies* 30 (1978), 182-87, at 182-3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Colgrave ed, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, 114.

shields himself by making the sign of the cross and he is now in a position of banishing the creatures to whence they came. The transformation of Guthlac from a terrified and troubled person who needs the assistance of the saint for his first encounter with the armies of evil, and the help of the psalmist is complete.

Common to all of Guthlac's enemies in Felix's *Vita* is that they act collectively and that they are intent on causing physical harm, not just terror. Symptomatic is that there is no place to hide from them: there is no sanctuary. Whether wild animals, Britons or demons, all of them are determined to break into his home. The home, however much we may query this term in the light of a barrow or grave serving as Guthlac's homestead,<sup>42</sup> should be a place of safety. While he is part of a religious community he is safe from such hauntings. And whereas Guthlac is seldom alone in his exile, his exclusion from the 'normal' world allows memories to resurface and to manifest themselves as hostile armies. Such narratives will have been familiar to Anglo-Saxon audiences from biblical parallels, such as Christ's temptation by the devil during his stay in the desert (Matthew 4:1) or the lives of desert saints. For Guthlac facing his demons allows the possibility to disassociate himself from his past and to atone for past wrongs.

This is not the place to look at some psychological reading, but the invading enemies may be a token of disassociation, a phenomenon observed in war veterans, where experiences which had to be suppressed in order to survive subsequently seep back into memory.<sup>43</sup> Responses to trauma are diverging and clearly medieval responses are not the same as ours.<sup>44</sup> Early medieval depictions of mental illness often disassociate the person from the entity causing the mental impairment.<sup>45</sup> Guthlac's terror also comes from the outside and when he

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<sup>42</sup> However, Thompson states that by the third tribulation Guthlac is no longer in a *tugurium* (hut) but *domus* (house), which should be read as evidence for a well-established community, *Felix, St Guthlac*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Hunt, p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> See the essay of Donna Dembinski in this volume.

<sup>45</sup> P. Dendle, *Demon Possession in Anglo-Saxon England* (Medieval Institute Publications, 2015). A recent study of Anglo-Saxon mental illness is offered by L. Lockett, 'The Limited Bole of the Brain in Mental and

has successfully overcome his trials he is rewarded with certain gifts, among which is the ability to heal mental impairments. Chapter XLI of Felix's *Vita* tells how a certain noble man, Hwætred, is afflicted by mental illness which is so bad that he tears his own limbs.<sup>46</sup> Neither doctor nor priest can help and he is taken to see Guthlac who cures him through prayer and breathing on his face. Another man, Ecga, is attacked by an unclean spirit, and is saved from what is feared to be the onset of 'perpetual madness' by Guthlac.<sup>47</sup>

Paul Gosser in his edition of the Old English translation of the *vita* claims that 'words and parts of the sentences were changed, but it is still remarkably faithful to the Latin text.'<sup>48</sup> The two *Exeter Book* poems are adaptations of Guthlac's story and must be based on some knowledge of the *Vita* or the Old English translation.<sup>49</sup> Although quite different, both poems include the terrifying encounters. In contrast to the prose *Vita Guthlac A* focusses much on God's support of Guthlac and the ways in which he gains resilience through divine support. For example, we are told that 'Ne mostan hy Guðlaces gæste sceþþan,/ ne þurh sarslege sawle gedælan/ wið lichoman ...' [They could not harm Guthlac's soul, nor through painful wounds divide his soul from the body...'; ll 226-27a].

Still, these poems do not belittle the threat caused by an enemy force with weapons or violence. When Guthlac is confronted with a band of monsters who mock him in the style of Maldonic 'advice', to give way to them (ll. 266-291), the potential threat to life and limb is real:

... We þas wic magum  
fotum afyllan; folc in ðriceð  
meara þreatum ond monfarum.

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Emotional Activity According to Anglo-Saxon Medical Learning', in: *Anglo-Saxon Emotions*, eds A. Jorgensen, F. McCormack and J. Wilcox (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 35- 51.

<sup>46</sup> Colgrave ed, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, pp. 126-28.

<sup>47</sup> Colgrave ed, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, pp. 130-32.

<sup>48</sup> *Das angelsächsische Prosa-Leben des hl. Guthlac* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1909).

<sup>49</sup> The poems will be cited from Krapp and Dobbie's edition with line numbers in the text.

beoð þa gebolgne, þa þec breodwiað  
tredað þec ond tergað, ond hyra torn wrecað,  
toberað þec blodgum lastum; ... (ll. 284b-289a).

[We can beat down this abode with (our) feet, an army, a host of horses and a troop of men. Then they will be enraged, then they will tread on you and tear you, and work their violent emotions, and carry you off leaving bloody traces...]

The saint counters this threatening encounter by saying that he will not bear weapons against them ‘No ic eow sweord ongan mit gebolgne hond oðþberan þence’ (ll. 303b – 304), but that he trusts God to protect him. While his enemies do not desist from their attacks Guthlac is protected by an angel, who gives him a calm mind. Instead of fearing the here and now, his mind is set on a place hereafter which allows him to endure his torments, but which also protects him from their attacks. Protection does not come in form of a fight, but in form of prayer and books.

*Guthlac B* does not mention any of the saint’s early life and thus omits Guthlac’s own transgressions, but begins with his life in the fens. From the start we are told how he was hounded in his dwelling by bands of monsters with *hludne herecirm* ‘loud battle-cry’ (l. 900a). However, the tribulations are only one of many for the weary saint. Plague-spewing dragons, hunger and armies of devils assail the saint, who nevertheless gives solace to the weary traveller who makes his way to his home.

In the opening lines the poet narrates that God bestowed healing powers on him, which is known to many:

[...]Us secgað bec

hu Guðlac wearð þurh godes willan  
eadig on Engle. He him ece geceas  
meaht ond myndbyrd. Mære wurdon  
his wundra geweorc wide ond side,  
breme æfter burgum geond Bryten innan,  
hu he monge oft þurh meaht godes  
gehælde hygegeomre hefigra wita,  
þe hine unsofte, adle gebundne,  
sarge gesohtun of siðwegum,  
freorigmode. .... (ll. 878b – 888a)

[We are told in books how Guthlac became blessed in Anglia through God's will. He chose eternal might and protection. His working of miracles became famous, widely known, celebrated in cities throughout Britain; how he very often healed through the power of God those, who sad in mind sought him on their travels, in discomfort and sorrow, who sad in mind, of heavy torments, bound by disease.]

The emphasis is on the healing of the mind and it suggests that Guthlac's example may be especially poignant for those that are assaulted in their minds. It is followed by descriptions of terrible 'troops' (*þreat*, l. 902b), which are based on Felix's *Vita*. The wounds in this version seem to have physical consequences since they injure Guthlac enough so that he gets sick and this eventually leads to his demise.

The relationship between *Guthlac A* and *B* is not quite clear. The poems have been copied consecutively into the same manuscript, but may ultimately derive from different poems. *Guthlac B* concentrates on the final days and the memory of the saint, and *Guthlac A*

similarly focuses on the trials and salvation of the saint. Guthlac's military credentials are underlined, but he is now a soldier of Christ, one of the *gecostan cempa* 'tried/chosen warriors' (l. 91).

Common to the Guthlac narratives is an element of healing. The ability to heal the sick is not unusual in descriptions of saintly powers, but Guthlac's powers are especially focused on healing the mind. Felix writes that his fame attracted:

[...] quos aut corporum egritudo aut immundorum spirituum infestatio aut  
commissorum errorum professio, aut aliorum quorumcumque criminum quibus  
humanum genus adluitur...?

**Commented [W1]:** If the ellipses are not yours, you put them in square brackets just like any addition.

[...those who were afflicted by sickness of body, by the possession of evil spirits, by the acknowledgement of sins committed, or by reason of any of the other wrongs by which the human race is surrounded ...] (trans Colgrave)]<sup>50</sup>

Past wrongs, by this definition, cause sickness and Guthlac, who has been purged from his own demons, now becomes a vehicle through which sickness can be alleviated. Felix further tells us that 'no sick person went without healing, no sad ones without joy, no weary ones without encouragement, no mourners without comfort, no anxious ones without counsel'.<sup>51</sup>

This focus on overcoming mental, rather than physical afflictions in the miracles associated with St Guthlac, is perhaps the clearest indicator of the association of trauma healing through the acknowledgment of past experiences.

<sup>50</sup> Colgrave ed, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, p. 138.

<sup>51</sup> Colgrave ed, *Felix Life of St Guthlac*, p. 138. We should note, however, that he does heal some physical ailments, such as a man who has a wound infection in his foot, *ibid*, p. 140.

Nigel Hunt writes that narrative may be one of the ways in which trauma can be addressed and healed.<sup>52</sup> Veterans have benefitted from verbalising their own experiences, but also from cultural artefacts, such as poems, drama and films which acknowledge their experiences in war. For a medieval audience a narrative that acknowledges war trauma and that allows for memories of slaughter and pain to be contextualised as experiences of an ex-warrior, and at the same time suggests that healing is possible, must have been comforting. Perhaps the popularity of Guthlac throughout the period is an indicator of this role, since war and conflict were constant possibilities for the Anglo-Saxon nobility. While poems such as the *Wanderer* offer consolation to those who had pledged their loyalty to the wrong side, and texts, such as *Beowulf* show that war has few victors. Guthlac, and specifically Felix's *Vita*, offer consolation to the survivors, and potentially also those who committed violence in battle.

The various narratives around Guthlac seem to have the purpose of healing through narration. Not all of the adaptations of Guthlac's life may be read primarily as trauma narratives, and it would be wrong to restrict the texts to just one purpose alone. There are clear intertextual references to biblical and patristic texts, influences of vision literature and hagiography, and the audiences of the various Guthlac versions will have found many different ideas reflected in the texts, and at the same time may have even have been aware of different versions of the same text.<sup>53</sup> If so, they would have been able to discern a specific thrust of this version. Lisa Weston mentions that the *Vercelli* version, which is based on chapters 28 to 32 of Felix's *Vita*, depicts Guthlac, who in other version is visited by the faithful, disciples and even kings, as stripped of a community.<sup>54</sup> The text 'concentrates the experience of reading Guthlac into a more intimate engagement between reader and text'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Hunt, *Memory*, pp. 114-120.

<sup>53</sup> 'Betwixt and Between', 2.

<sup>54</sup> Weston, 'Betwixt', 17.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

The homily thus emphasises devotion and reflection. Weston writes that the literary figure of Guthlac moves between languages and reading communities in his various textual transformations. Felix's *Vita* focuses on the healing of the spirit and mind, but by the tenth century the narrative of St Guthlac seems to have moved from the spiritual healing of ex-warriors to healing in general. *Guthlac B* makes reference to mankind's exile after the expulsion from paradise (ll. 825b-871) through the deeds of Adam and Eve. Even Guthlac is not immune from death. His death is described in that remarkably Old English metaphor in which death is served as a bitter drink, a *poculum mortis*,<sup>56</sup> which Eve prepared for Adam:

Bryþen wæs ongunnon  
þætte Adame Eue gebyrnde  
æt fruman worulde. Feond byrlade  
ærest þære idese, ond heo Adame  
hyre swæsum were, siþþan scencte  
bittor bædeweg... (ll. 980b- 985a)

[The brew was set to work, which Eve at the beginning of the world had fermented for Adam. The fiend first poured it for this woman, and she offered it to Adam, her dear husband the bitter drinking cup].

Any medieval listener will have been aware that this brew did not just result in the mortality of mankind, but also in pain and sickness.

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<sup>56</sup> On the *poculum mortis* see H. Magennis, 'The Cup as Symbol and Metaphor in Old English Literature', *Speculum* 60 (1985), pp. 517-36.

Just as Guthlac is healed by singing and recitation of religious texts, the audience of the poem had a possibility to identify with the suffering of the saint and to recognise their own nightmares without having to confess to these terrors. The example of St Guthlac promises healing in body and soul to those who have been afflicted in battle. The fact that an Old English translation of the Latin *vita* was made during or just after the reign of Alfred suggests that it may have been useful to a lay audience who may have been involved in the Viking wars and who had to live with the images of what they had seen. Later adaptations still include the torments, and while they no longer explicitly focus on the aftermath of war, they still carry a strong message of the promise that God will help those who are experiencing trauma if their faith stays strong. They also include a shift from a male-centred experience of combat, to a more inclusive, gender-neutral experience of trauma.

The fight is fought by others. *Guthlac A* insists that instead of old warriors, it is the soldiers of Christ, those who fight with their faith, who are victorious:

Swa soðfæstra sawla motun  
in ecne geard up gestigan  
rodera rice, þa þe ræfnað her  
wordum ond weorcum wuldorcyninges  
lare longsume, on hyra lifes tid  
earniað on eorðan ecan lifes,  
hames in heahþu. Þat beoð husulweras,  
cempan gecorene, Criste leofe,  
berað in breostum beorhtne geleafan  
hailg hyht, ....

[So the faith-fast souls climb up to the great dwelling, the kingdom of the heavens, those who long carry out here the teaching of the King of Glory through words and works, earn eternal life in their life's time on earth, a home in the height. These are the men of the sacrament, chosen warriors, dear to Christ; they bear the bright light of faith in (their) breasts, holy hope... (ll. 790-800a)]

There is no question of whether Anglo-Saxons suffered from PTSD, it is rather how they experienced it and how they dealt with it. Narratives may contain elements that allow people to relive and overcome their demons. The descriptions of the symptoms are of outward entities that attack the body, but more significantly the mind. The cure is, unsurprisingly, salvation through faith and intercession and the promise of a place where the soul can no longer be harmed.

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