4 Rewriting Guthlac's Wilderness

Introduction

In turning from ruins to wilderness and the Old English narratives of Guthlac, I continue an exploration of how Anglo-Saxon literary and documentary texts constructed lived places and the spaces contiguous to them, and what cultural contexts those constructions reveal. Saint Guthlac withdraws to an island containing a ruined structure, once a grave, later a cistern; I discuss that in this chapter rather than with the previous examples of ruins because of the way the ruin intersects with constructions of wilderness and the people who live in supposed wildernesses, as well as with the ways in which the Guthlac narratives anticipate much later colonizing invasions.

The early English saint Guthlac lived from 674 to 714, the last fifteen years as a hermit on an island in the East Anglian fenlands. At the request of King Ælfwald of the East Angles, the monk Felix wrote about Guthlac's life in Latin between about 730 and 740, relying on accounts of Guthlac's successor in the hermitage, Cissa, as well as of his frequent visitor Wilfred, among others (*Felix's Life* 6, 15). Felix frequently borrows details from Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert* and Gregory's *Life of St. Boniface*, as well as from other saints' lives (*Felix's Life* 16-17). Felix's *Life* was translated into Old English prose, with versions of the material in two different manuscripts of the eleventh century. It was also adapted into two different poems, both preserved in the *Exeter Book*, a significant collection of Old English poetry written near 1000; in the later Middle Ages, it was translated and adapted again. An abbey, of which only ruins survive today, was built on the site of Guthlac's hermitage.

In thinking about the versions of Guthlac's life, this chapter draws on the insights of postcolonial theory as well as of ecocriticism, though there are potential pitfalls in thinking through the life of a member of a majority culture though a postcolonial lens. In a discussion of colonial expansion in Canada and Australia that draws on ecocritical insights, Kylie Crane writes:

> The use of the term postcolonialism in conjunction with a project that focuses only on settler colonies and, further, only on the literature produced by authors from perspectives that are best described as settlers – that is, from the privileged – may be troubling (19).

The same might be said of an analysis of Felix's *Vita* and the Old English prose and poetic adaptations: works by and about people privileged in

Anglo-Saxon England: a member of the royal family of the Germanic people that conquered the Britons, a high-ranking cleric who becomes a monk, as written about by another monk, a Christian male of the dominant religion. Yet thinking about this text through postcolonial theory makes it possible to uncover some troubling things: namely, the ideas that enable later colonial expansion are already present in Anglo-Saxon texts, in both the Anglo-Latin original and the Old English translation and adaptations.

Post-colonial criticism attends to power relationships and knowledge imbalances between colonizers and colonized. Post-colonial theory usually focuses on modern empires, on colonies or former colonies, and their subjects, on the notion of the 'other,' on who speaks on whose behalf. But it can also help to understand what happened when Angles and Saxons invaded Britain in the years following the Roman withdrawal and supplanted the native Britons in positions of influence and power. The *Lives* of Guthlac present that overthrow, as well as the subsequent battles between the 'englisc,' and the Welsh and Britons who continued to occupy the margins of Britain in Wales in the west as well as in the fens in the east, as legitimate, and in fact as being in no need of any justification. Attending to the ways in which a text like the *Life of Guthlac* normalizes and naturalizes conquest and power imbalances illuminates the development of a world-view that enables later colonizing operations to be undertaken as if it were legitimate for the English to subdue the Irish and, later, the inhabitants of North America, China, India, and Africa.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism attends to the intersections between colonization and environmental degradation, to issues of environmental justice, and to the ways in which people of color are aligned with the earth in a paradigm that makes a parallel between 'natural resources' and 'human resources,' thus placing some humans, alongside animals and the environment, in a position of material utility to other humans, usually white and male. Laura Wright cautions that in looking at intersections between postcolonial and environmental theories, 'it is necessary to examine the ways that environmentalism, as the social movement that gave birth to the kinds of ecocritical analysis codified by Buell and other scholars, is a Western concept' (10) and that 'post-colonial ecocriticism – particularly in its current manifestation as a white and, more often than not, Western academic discourse – is further complicated by its need to maintain rigorous and

sustained literary critique while simultaneously working to avoid speaking for the environmental needs of non-Western people and landscapes' (175). As a white, tenured faculty member at a North American university, albeit neither male nor Christian, I write from a position of substantial privilege, and undoubtedly with blind spots. In thinking and writing about occupants of England and Wales of the distant past, and their subjugation by invaders, from perspectives developed by modern scholars of colonialism, I attempt to tread carefully as I seek to understand how the Anglo-Saxons' views toward people outside of their own communities intersected with their view of the land and animals, positioning both as available literally, ideologically, and spiritually for the use of those in the majority culture.

This chapter does not explicitly address ecofeminism, though it is informed by the ideas discussed in Chapter 2 with respect to Grendel's mother and Chapter 6 with respect to the *Exeter Book*, Riddle 52 which depicts a female slave engaged in manual labor, or supervising criminals, and simultaneously as a metaphorical stand-in for an object. Women are absent from the *Vita Guthlaci* and its Old English translation and adaptations, except as objects of rape, much as they are absent from *Andreas*, as discussed in Chapter 2, as well as from the Old English poetic *Exodus*. But the ecofeminist insight that European culture systematically privileged men over women helps to understand how it also privileged some men over all other humans.

Felix's *Vita Guthlaci* and the Old English versions of the *Life of Guthlac* locate Guthlac's hermitage in the 'wilderness,' then as now a troubled concept. In this chapter, I discuss Felix's Latin *Vita* alongside the anonymous Old English prose translation as well as the poetic *Guthlac A*. As Kylie Crane writes, 'wilderness entails a colonial gesture, placing indigenous presences and practices under erasure' (Crane 2). Women are likewise erased from the narrative of Guthlac's life. Crane points out that wilderness is 'marked by its natural qualities' and 'conceived in terms that oppose it to civilization' (14-15). This description of wilderness serves aptly for the spaces that Felix and the anonymous Old English prose translator and adapting versifiers deploy. In the 'wilderness' he occupies, however, Guthlac encounters demonic Britons or British demons. This anticipates later colonizing incursions in which the land occupied by native peoples is understood as a wilderness, so as to enable discounting their occupation of and right to it – or, less passively, that this discourse participates in a view of English expansion that enabled later colonizing violence.

The importance of activism links postcolonial and environmental critiques, as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue in their book *Postcolonial*

Ecocriticism, and both are threatened by multinational corporations. Post-colonial, ecocritical scholarship 'finds itself increasingly compromised by a global capitalism that has not always been challenged to the same degree as the imperial behaviors it instantiates and inspires' (11). An effective challenge to eco-imperialism requires a rejection of consumer culture. The economic system of Anglo-Saxon England did not encourage excessive consumption on the scale of contemporary developed societies, and in fact one of the things that characterizes many hermits, including Guthlac, is the ascetic renunciation of material goods and comforts. But the assumptions enabling Guthlac's move into a hermitage, as well as his biographer's assertions that plants and animals existed to serve him, also underscore modern capitalist ideas that animals and landscapes are limitless resources available for human use. As Huggan and Tiffin further argue 'what the postcolonial/ecocritical alliance brings out, above all, is the need for a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals, and environment – one that requires attention, in turn, to the cultural politics of representation' (12). Understanding how the ideologies that underpin capitalism and colonization already suffused the life of an eighth-century saint at the margins of Christianity can help to illuminate how those same ideologies continue to operate today and how they have evolved to the point of being a threat to planetary stability.

Post-colonial ecocriticism foregrounds environmental justice, noting how imperial conquest often depends upon disruptive and destructive mining or drilling into the earth, replacement of subsistence farming with cash crops, and the abuse of human labor in slavery or indentured servitude. Huggan and Tiffin point out that it can be hard to define either postcolonial or ecocritical theory, but they locate a point of convergence in the work of the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood. Plumwood pointed out that Greek and Roman culture, as well as Jewish and later Christian traditions, defined humans in association with 'reason' and in opposition to 'nature,' excluding from moral consideration beings without reason – a category that included animals and the earth and also ended up encompassing women as well as 'othered' people. Plumwood calls this paradigm 'hegemonic centrism' (2002: 148), and asserts that it has enabled racism, sexism, and colonialism, along with environmental degradation. Huggan and Tiffin note: 'as Plumwood argues, the western definition of humanity depended – and still depends – on the presence of the "not-human": the uncivilised, the animal and animalistic. European justification for invasion and colonisation proceeded from this basis, understanding non-European lands and the people and animals that inhabited them as "spaces", "unused, underused or

empty"' (5). The feminine is explicitly 'other' in the *Vita Guthlaci*, implied only in reference to rape as object of Anglo-Saxon violence, and otherwise completely absent. The Britons who fought against Anglo-Saxon occupation are depicted as non-human in their association with the demons who harass Guthlac after he retreats to his hermitage.

Huggan and Tiffin follow Anthony Vital on the importance of language as a point of intersection between postcolonial and ecological criticisms: 'Vital suggests that the best way to reconcile postcolonial criticism and eco/environmental criticism might be to take into account "the complex interplay of social history with the natural world, and how language both shapes and reveals such interactions" (90)' (Huggan-Tiffin 15). In carefully reading the Latin and Old English *Lives* of Guthlac, I seek to uncover some of the ways in which language reveals interactions between the natural world and previous occupants of a place conceptualized as 'wild,' on the one hand, and a person privileged by class, religion, and gender, on the other. By constructing the landscape and its occupants in these ways, the Guthlac narratives – which were adapted and translated in Middle English versions as well, thus reaching nearly the point of actual colonial expansion – became part of a textual tradition that shaped interactions with colonized peoples and lands. For the Anglo-Saxons this was a distant future, but it was a future that Anglo-Saxon cultural artifacts helped to enable.

The site of Guthlac's hermitage is characterized as a 'wilderness,' an early iteration of a long tradition of defining the land of 'other' people as uninhabited, essentially by making the claim that such other people are not fully human. As Huggan and Tiffin point out, 'throughout western intellectual history, civilisation has consistently been constructed by or against the wild, savage, and animalistic, and has consequently been haunted or "dogged" by it' (Huggan-Tiffin 134). The *Lives* of Guthlac are assumed to 'describe' the wilderness of the fens, but I argue that in fact they imagine and construct it, first insisting that the fens *are* untracked and uncultivated despite evidence to the contrary, then imagining the creatures that occupy the area around Guthlac's hermitage as demonic rather than human. Moreover, the Old English poetic version of Felix's Latin *Vita*, *Guthlac A*, re-imagines and re-constructs that wilderness in ways that depart substantially from the Latin or the prose translation.

Crane argues that 'wilderness' is continually used and re-imagined in opposition to 'civilization', and as 'civilization' expands, the meanings and territories designated as 'wilderness' are in on-going flux. She argues that reading through both ecocriticism and postcolonial theory 'enable[s] the development of an informed reading position that queries the assumptions of

wilderness engendered in the respective narratives.... Whether considered semantically or politically, wilderness clearly remains a highly contested space' (12). What is meant by 'wilderness' has to be considered within political, linguistic, and cultural contexts and subtexts. In the *Lives* of Guthlac, 'wilderness' is presented as uncontested space, even as the language that describes it evokes the ghostly traces of previous habitation. The island on which Guthlac builds his hermitage is 'untracked' and 'uncultivated' and known only to Tatwine – but then, it *is* known to Tatwine, and it turns out to be tracked after all. Guthlac fights off repeated attacks from 'demons' as he establishes his residence in his hermitage. Constructing the space as 'untracked' allows Felix as well as the translator and the versifiers to imagine the occupants who attack Guthlac as 'demons,' attempting to erase prior human presence by redefining it as not human.

Guthlac as Warrior

Felix's prose *Vita Guthlaci* opens with an account of Guthlac's ancestry through his father Penwalh down to Icel. In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 755, Icel's ancestry is traced further back through Offa to Woden (*Two Saxon Chronicles* 50). Felix locates Guthlac's ancestry in an important line in literary, historical and mythical terms. (The later Offa, King of Mercia, had not yet come to power at the time when Felix wrote.)

Felix describes Guthlac as an obedient, affectionate, even-tempered child, but as he reaches adulthood, his temperament shifts:

> iuvenili in pectore egregius dominandi amor fervesceret, tunc valida pristinorum heroum facta reminiscens, veluti ex sopore evigilatus, mutata mente, adgregatis satellitum turmis, sese in arma convertit.
> A noble desire for command burned in his young breast, he remembered the valiant deeds of heroes of old, and as though awakening from sleep, he changed his disposition and gathering bands of followers took up arms. (80, 81)

The Old English translation makes some intriguing changes to the Latin:

> þa gemunde he þa strangan dæda þara unmanna and þæra woruld-frumena; he þa, swa he of slæpe onwoce, wearð his mod oncyrred, and he gesomnode miccle scole and wered his geþoftena and hys efen-hæfdlingas, and him sylf to wæpnum feng.

> Then he remembered the mighty deeds of the *unmanna* and those of days of old; then, as if he awoke from sleep, and his mind changed direction, and he gathered many fellow pupils and armed his companions and his equals, and took weapons to himself. (*Anglo-Saxon Version* 12, 14)

The meaning of 'unmanna,' untranslated in the passage above, is unclear, possibly pointing to 'heroes,' possibly 'evil ones.' The Old English version, unlike the Latin, suggests that Guthlac gathered his schoolmates to go to battle, emphasizing this by reference both to 'scola' and to 'efen-hæfdlingas,' a repetition with no parallel in the Latin. Moreover, the Old English translator renders the Latin 'heroum,' meaning 'hero' or 'demigod,' with another double construction, using both 'unmanna' and 'woruld-frumena.' The word 'unmann,' 'evil one, demon' might be an error for 'iumann,' 'man of old,' as suggested by the use also of 'woruld-frumena.' But 'woruld-frumena' is itself an odd compound, perhaps emphasizing that the companions Guthlac gathered were men of the world rather than the angels who would later become his companions.

Alfred Siewers argues that *Guthlac A* was written, like Felix's *Vita*, in the eighth century, at a time when 'the cultural identity of Anglo-Saxon Mercia as a kingdom and as a people was still a work in progress in the eighth century … and this has important implications for the literary landscapes associated with it and their related religious ideology' (2003: 8). *Guthlac A* is preserved only in the late tenth-century manuscript known as the *Exeter Book*, and there is little internal evidence to determine its initial date of composition. Felix's *Vita*, however, can more reliably be dated by external evidence to the early eighth century, so while Siewers' analysis may not be applicable to the poem, it surely applies to the Latin *Vita*. For the Latin text, Guthlac's battles with Welsh warriors in his early career as warrior, echoed by the later battles with demons, represent a cultural and military clash from living memory. Contemporary historical accounts tell us that the Mercians shared a border with Wales, and that the Welsh and Mercians engaged in frequent battles. The building of a massive earthwork known as Offa's Dyke is attributed to the Mercian King Offa, a half-century later, but recent archaeological evidence suggests the possibility that construction began earlier ('Could Offa's Dyke' 10).

The account of Guthlac's battles with enemy troops begins with the narrative of his participation in plundering the bodies of the enemy dead, before moving to a description of the actual fighting. Felix writes that Guthlac always gives back part of the spoils of war, in a kind of apologetic acknowledgement that burning, killing, and taking contraband are perhaps not ideal activities for a future saint:

> Et cum adversantium sibi urbes et villas, vicos et castella igne ferroque vastaret, conrasis undique diversarum gentium sociis, inmensas 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. (80, 81)

Plundering booty from one's dead and defeated enemies was a necessary feature of the early Anglo-Saxon economy, but in literary texts it is frequently glossed over or attributed rather to the enemy than the heroes. The emphasis on Guthlac's return of a third of the collected loot echoes this sense that there is something less than noble about the activity.

The Old English version of the *Vita* is more direct about the negative connotation of looting. The account of taking the loot is briefer, saying simply that Guthlac 'of mannum heora æhta nam' ('took their possessions from men,' 14). This is immediately followed by divine reproach, in a passage with no parallel in the Latin:

> Þa wæs he semninga innan manod godcundlic and læred þæt he þa word hete, ealla þa he swa genam he het þriddan dæl agifan þam mannum þe he hit ær ongenæmde.
> Then he was suddenly inwardly divinely admonished and instructed that he must then give the command, all that which had thus taken, he commanded the third part to be given back to the men from which he had earlier taken it. (14)

Moreover, there is a shift in responsibility. While the Latin Guthlac returns the plunder himself, the Old English Guthlac commands his men to return it. Transferring the task of returning the loot to his men perhaps dilutes Guthlac's responsibility for having done the deed in the first place.

Having made excuses for Guthlac's pillaging of the enemy, Felix goes on to recount his victories during his nine years as a warrior, during which

> persecutorum suorem adversantiumque sibi hostium famosum excidium crebris vastationum fragoribus peregisset, tandem defessis viribus post tot praedas, caedes rapinasque quas arma triverunti, lassi quieverunt....

> He had achieved the glorious overthrow of his persecutors, foes and adversaries by frequent blows and devastations, at last their strength was exhausted after all the pillage, slaughter, and rapine which their arms had wrought, and being worn out, they kept the peace. (80, 81)

Guthlac's 'glorious overthrow' of his enemies, and his return of a third of the spoils of war, apparently excuses rape, killing, and looting, as well as the burning of houses and presumably fields. Domesticated animals were frequently taken from the defeated foes, along with stored food, weapons, armor and shields, and other valuables, perhaps including coins. Peace finally comes because the enemy is 'exhausted' by pillage, assault, death and destruction. The lack of any kind of comment on the idea that sexual assault of women can be a tool of warfare makes rape appear 'normal' alongside burning and killing and pillaging, and the implication is that restitution is as simple as returning a portion of the plunder. When burning villages, Guthlac likely destroyed fields as well as houses: domesticated as well as wild animals and plants are killed alongside the human occupants. The land occupied by the human enemy itself becomes the target of Guthlac's violence. Given the references in the *Exeter Book* riddles to female Welsh slaves (see Chapter 6), Guthlac's loot may have included humans taken with the express purpose of enslaving them.

The Latin continues with a sustained meteorological metaphor, saying that Guthlac 'beatae memoria' ('of blessed memory,' 80, 81) spent these years tossed by storm and waves among gloomy clouds. The passage uses details of the storm in an instrumental sense, subordinating them to human concerns; see Chapter 6 for a discussion of the 'Storm' riddles (1-3) in which weather events are described on their own terms rather than as symbolic of human concerns. The Old English translation radically abbreviates the passage, recording that 'se eadige Guthlac' ('the blessed Guthlac') spent nine years in 'ehtnysse' ('persecution') of the enemy, during which 'he hine sylfne betweox þises andweardan middaneardes wealcan dwelode' ('he himself dwelt among the presence of the waves of middle-earth,' 14). The metaphor of storm and the discussion of Guthlac's warrior activities are reduced, and the reference to the 'divine overthrow' of the enemy is completely eliminated. The effect is to lay greater emphasis on the divine admonition to return the property he has pillaged from those he had defeated.

The text moves from the descriptions of battles to a description of a night in which Guthlac contemplates 'antiquorum regum stirpis suae per transacta retro saecula miserabiles exitus flagitioso vitae termino' ('the wretched deaths and shameful ends of the ancient kings of his race in the

course of the past ages,' 82, 83). The Old English translation follows the Latin quite closely here: 'he geþohte þa ealdan kyningas þe iu wæron, þurh earmlicne deað and þurh sarlicne utgang þæs manfullan lifes, þe þas woruld forleton' ('he thought about the old kings that used to be, who abandoned this world through miserable deaths and through lamentable departures from their evil lives,' 14). Both texts use the battle against the enemy to illustrate Guthlac's development through young adulthood to his decision to dedicate himself to serving God by becoming a hermit. The people who have been defeated, the homes and fields and crops and domesticated animals destroyed, and the individuals killed are not important in the narrative of Guthlac's life. His Christian faith is what matters.

Women as objects, actual objects, animals, cultivated fields and dwellings, people of other social groups: all become analogous objects in warfare. Postcolonial ecocriticism attends to the intersections between the treatment of humans and the non-human; postcolonial feminism points to the intersections between gender and race. Attending to intersections among them reveals how the Old English versions of *Guthlac* demonstrate that the ideologies that enabled the subjugation of humans and animals and landscape to the needs and desires of European colonizers in India, Africa, China, and the Americas were not Renaissance inventions, but extensions of ideas articulated and developed in Anglo-Saxon England.

Guthlac as Hermit

Huggan and Tiffin point out that while European settlers occasionally adopted ideas from the cultures they inhabited, they were more likely to import their own ideologies. 'More usually … ideas of animal treatment and land use initially formed in Europe predisposed colonial administrators and settlers to a facile belief in the apparently limitless resources of the settler colonies' (8). Felix's *Life of Guthlac* and its old English translation and poetic adaptation, itself part of a textual tradition of saints' lives, transmits ideas from Latin literate culture as well as Anglo-Saxon warrior society; they show the Anglo-Saxons ignoring all inhabitants of a territory they wished to colonize (whether animals or humans) and calling it 'weste,' a word with a range of definitions including 'waste' as well as 'desert' or 'wilderness.' Huggan and Tiffin continue 'Such places, after all, were apparently untamed, unowned and, above all, unused; and, accordingly, settlers set about rendering them productive and profitable through imported methods rather than by accommodating them to local circumstances' (8). Guthlac

and his biographers deny the evidence of prior human habitation in their characterization of the fenland island where he makes his hermitage as wilderness.

Having decided to become a hermit, Guthlac sets off to find a place within this fen to live. The passage rewards quotation and examination at length:

> Est in meditullaneis Brittanniae partibus inmensae magnitudinis aterrima palus, quae, a Grontae fluminis ripis incipiens, haud procul a castello quem dicunt nomine Gronte, nunc stagnus, nunc flactris, interdum nigris fusi vaporis laticibus, necnon et crebris insularum nemorumque intervenientibus flexuosis rivigarum anfractibus, ab austro in aquilonem mare tenus longissimo tractu protenditur. Igitur cum supradictus vir beatae memoriae Guthlac illius vastissimi heremi inculta loca conperisset, caelestibus auxiliis adiutus, rectissimo callis tramite tenus usque perrexit.
>
> There is in the midland district of Britain a most dismal fen of immense size, which begins at the banks of the river Granta not far from the camp which is called Cambridge, and stretches from the south as far north as the sea. It is a very long tract, now consisting of marshes, now of bogs, sometimes of black waters overhung by fog, sometimes studded with wooded islands and traversed by the windings of tortuous streams. So when this same man of blessed memory, Guthlac, had learned about the wild places of this vast desert, he made his way thither with divine assistance by the most direct route. (86, 87)

The Old English version follows the Latin fairly closely, though there are several differences:

> Ys on Bretone-lande sum fenn unmaetre mycclnysse þæt onginneð fram Grante ea naht feor fram þære cestre, ðy ylcan nama ys nemned Granteceaster. Þær synd unmaete moras, hwilon sweart waeter-steal, and hwilon fule ea-riþas yrnende, and swylce eac manige ealand and hreod and beorhgas and treow-gewrido, and hit mid menigfealdan bignyssum widgille and lang þurhwunað on norð-sæ. Mid þan se foresprecena wer and þære eadigan gemynde Guðlac ðæs widgillan westenes þa ungearawan stowe þær gemette, þa wæs he mid godcunde fultume gefylst, and þa sona þan rihtestan wege þyder togeferde.
>
> There is in Britain a fen of immense size, which begins from the river Granta not far from the city, which is named Grantchester. There are

> immense marshes, now a black pool of water, now foul running streams, and also many islands, and reeds, and hillocks, and thickets, and with manifold windings wide and long it continues up to the north sea. When the aforesaid man, Guthlac of blessed memory, found out this uncultivated spot of the wide wilderness, he was comforted with divine support, and journeyed forthwith by the straightest way thither. (20, 21)

The Old English version eliminates the characterization of the fen as 'most dismal' while emphasizing the 'immense' size of the region with a doubled use of the word 'unmæte' to modify both 'fenn' and 'moras.' The detail from the Latin *Vita* that the islands are wooded 'nemorum' is shifted in the Old English, which instead makes reference to 'hreod' and 'treow-gewrido,' 'reeds' and 'thickets.'

A man named Tatwine takes Guthlac by boat 'per invia lustra' ('through trackless bogs') to 'insula media in palude posita quae ante paucis propter remotioris heremi solitudinem inculta vix nota habebatur' ('an island in the middle of the marsh which on account of the wildness of this very remoted desert had hitherto remained untilled and known to a very few,' 88, 89). Colgrave's translation of 'invia lustra' as 'trackless bogs' is only one possibility for the phrase; it could also be rendered as 'impassable wilderness.' For an ecotheoretical analysis, the differences are not inconsequential. 'Impassable' suggests that it is not possible to move through the area, though the fact that Tatwine is taking Guthlac through it contradicts this. 'Trackless' thus seems the more logical translation, though this too is contradicted by the evidence revealed in the following paragraphs about prior habitation. In the Old English, Tatwine takes Guthlac on his boat 'þurh þa rugan fennas' ('through the uncultivated fens'); 'wæs þæt land on middan þam westene' ('the land was in the middle of the wilderness').

Both Felix and the Old English translator imagine the location of Guthlac's hermitage specifically as having no prior human activity, though the language they use to convey this varies slightly. In both versions, the fact that the land is 'inculta' or 'rug,' i.e. 'uncultivated' is taken as synonymous with its status as 'lustra' or 'westen,' i.e. 'wilderness.' Both versions, in other words, assume that agricultural cultivation is synonymous with occupation of a landscape. We know today that hunting-and-gathering societies have existed for many millennia, and it appears that those who lived in the East Anglian fens survived in just such a fashion, because the frequently-flooded marshes could not be used to plant crops. Leo Mellor argues that 'to imagine a landscape as a wilderness has often been, throughout history, a way to render it into a *tabula rasa* for the imagination, thronged with natural forces and ripe with possibilities – but scythed clear of human presence. This is

mendacious when not merely naïve' (Mellor 111). It is tempting to excuse the Anglo-Saxons as being simply unaware that fen-dwellers existed, but they must have known from travel and trade that they did. Another possible explanation for the description of the area as 'wasteland' or 'wilderness' is that Guthlac, Felix and their contemporaries could not understand the fenland people as human. Such a mindset enables Guthlac's occupation of the island and sets a precedent for much later colonizing violence.

Felix tells his readers that after spending some days on the island, Guthlac determines to return to the monastery and bid farewell to his companions there; after ninety days, 'ad supradictum locum, quasi ad paternae hereditatis habitaculum … regressus est' ('he returned to the above-mentioned place whence he had come, as though to a home inherited from his father,' 90, 91). In the Old English, this is rendered as 'to þære stowe þæs leofan westenes' ('to the place of his beloved wilderness,' 22). It is interesting that the Old English text (but not the Latin) calls Guthlac's hermitage 'beloved' on account of its location in the wilderness.

At this point, Felix provides additional details about the island. Despite the earlier insistence that the land had been untracked and unused, it turns out that it had seen prior human habitation:

> Erat itaque in praedicta insula tumulus agrestibus glaebis coacervatus, quem olim avari solitudinis frequentatores lucri ero illic adquiriendi defodientes scindebant, in cuius latere velut cisterna inesse videbatur; in qua vir beatae memoriae Guthlac desuper inposigo tugurio habitare coepit.
> Now there was in the said island a mound built of clods of earth which greedy comers to the waste had dug open, in the hope of finding treasure there; in the side of this there seemed to be some sort of cistern, and in this Guthlac the man of blessed memory began to dwell, after building a hut in it. (92-94, 93-95)

The Old English text is quite similar to the Latin at this point:

> Wæs þær on þam ealende sum hlaw mycel ofer eorðan geworht, þone ylcan men iu geara for feos wilnunga gedulfon and bræcon. Þa wæs þær on oþre sidan þæs hlawes gedolfen swylce mycel wæter-seað wære. On þam seaðe ufan se eadiga wer Guthlac him hus getimbrode, sona fram fruman þæs þe he þæt ancer-setl gesæt.
> There on the island a great mound had been constructed on the earth; that same (mound) men in former years had dug and broken up in desire of treasure. There on the other side of the mound a hole had been dug

> up, that was like a large well. Above the well, the blessed man Guthlac built himself a house, immediately from the beginning that he dwelt in that hermitage. (26)

Both texts refer quite clearly to several layers of pre-existing occupancy: the people who initially buried the treasure; the people who dug in search of that treasure later on; and the people who constructed a cistern in the side of the mound. O'Brien O'Keeffe summarizes the evidence for occupation of the Anglian fenland: 'There is evidence of roman colonization on the silts, its retraction in the later second century after flooding, and possible rebuilding in the fourth century, but the archaeological record of settlement is difficult and complicated by silting. The evidence of settlement in the early Anglo-Saxon period is thus ambiguous in the extreme' (7). While the archaeological record is too limited to prove contemporary occupation of the region, the documentary evidence that Felix, perhaps unwittingly, provides can be taken as clear indication that the region had seen human habitation prior to Guthlac's arrival if not contemporary with his occupation of the island.

A further Old English version of the Life of Guthlac, *Vercelli Homily* XXIII, follows Felix closely in calling Guthlac's hermitage an 'igland' ('island') containing 'sum mycel hlæw of eorþan geworht, þone ylcan hlæw iu geara men bræcon & dulfon for feor þingum' ('a great grave worked of earth; in days of yore men broke into and dug up that same grave for perverse things,' Scragg 383, ll. 1-4). Jane Roberts suggests that both prose translations might derive from a common source undertaken during Alfred's program of translation of important texts into Old English (1986: 376).

Treasure in a mound might be an indicator of burial: the archaeological record confirms accounts in Old English poetry of local leaders buried with weapons and armor, decorated horns and other treasures, and even the Sutton Hoo ship. Treasure might also be buried in a cave or barrow during some kind of disruption to a family or a community by, for example, famine, plague, or war. *Beowulf* contains a passage sometimes called 'the lay of the last survivor,' the words of a man leaving treasure in a barrow after the rest of his community has died. He speaks to the earth:

> Heald þu nu, hruse,
> eorla æhte! Hwæt,
> gode begeaton.
> feorhbealo frecne,
> leoda minra,
> gesawon seledream.
> nu hæleð ne moston,
> hyt ær on ðe
> Guðdeað fornam,
> fyra gehwylcne
> þara ðe þis lif ofgeaf,

> Earth, hold you now, now that heroes can no longer, what earls possessed. Behold, good people seized it from you before. War-death, savage deadly evil, has taken every one of my people; those who gave up this life saw happiness in the hall. (ll. 2247-52a)

The Britons are known to have lived in the fens, using boats much like today's punts to move about the shallow streams among the marshes and islands, fishing for sustenance and living on the islands. After the invasions of the Angles and Saxons beginning in the sixth century, Britons took refuge in the fens from the attacks of the English. Whoever buried or hid treasure on the island that Guthlac appropriated as his hermitage may have thought to return for it, or may have hoped later generations would find it. Whether those who later dug up the mound and scattered lumps of earth found treasure there is not recorded, by Felix or in other records. There is no record of who later dug a cistern in the side of the mound. But these tracks of human use demonstrate an island with a human history, despite Felix's claims that the island was an untracked wasteland.

Animals, it should be noted, also leave tracks and other traces of their habitation. The rabbits that would have lived in the fens in abundance, for instance, make herdpaths between their burrows and locations of frequent feeding; they also leave droppings as a trace of their presence. To call a territory 'trackless' ignores the evidence of animal occupation and suggests that only the tracks left by humans are worthy of notice. To call the island 'uncultivated' suggests that human use trumps animal occupation, and that animal occupation is always subject to human intervention. The description of the island is written in such a way as entirely to privilege Guthlac and his occupation over any animal inhabitant. Later in the narrative, animals as well as plants are depicted as serving Guthlac.

Guthlac determines after he has settled into his hermitage that he will no longer wear garments made of linen or wool, but only of animal skins. Linen is plant-based, while wool does not require the death of the animal for its use; but clothing made of animal skins can only be made after an animal has been killed, whether for food or specifically for its hide. There is a long tradition of hermits and saints wearing animal skins as clothing. Gale Owen-Crocker suggests that Guthlac adopted these garments in order to do penance (183), though it might have been Felix who chose the detail in an echo of earlier saints' lives. In any case, Felix uses it to establish something about Guthlac, as the human subject of the *Vita*, and not because of any attention to the life of the animal killed for its skin. As discussed in the following chapter, animals in some of the *Exeter Book* riddles are given

voices that protest their killing for human utility. But in Felix's *Vita* there is no suggestion that the animal possesses agency or is worthy of moral consideration.

Animals and reeds, and even water, exist within Felix's *Vita* to serve Guthlac and demonstrate his saintly connection to God. Felix tells a story of a visitor who finished writing a document on parchment and walked away, leaving it lying where a crow is able to pick it up and carry it away. Guthlac gets his boat and pursues the crow in order to retrieve the parchment.

> Dein, cum ad aliquod stagnum haud procul a praefata insula situm devenisset, conspicit non longe in media planitie stagni unam harundinem curvato cacumine stantem, quae stagni tremulis quassabatur undique limphis; in cuius fastigio aequiperatas, scedulas aequali lance pendentes, velut ab humana manu positas, cerneres. Mirabile dictu! tangi, non tactae, contiguis videbantur ab undis. At ille frater arripiens de harundine cartam, cum magna admiratione grates Deo persolvens, venerantiam validae fidei de eo quod contigit venerabili viro Dei Guthlaco conferens, unde egressus domum reversus est.
> Then when he had reached a certain pool not far from the same island he saw nearby, in the middle of the pool, a reed standing with its top bent down and shaken on every side by the moving waters of the pond; on the very top could be seen the very leaves of parchment hanging exactly balanced as though they had been placed there by a human hand, and, marvellous to relate, they were apparently being touched by the waves around them and yet were intact. And the brother, snatching the document from the reed, gave thanks to God in much amazement, at the same time showing great respect for the steadfast faith of the venerable man of God Guthlac with regard to what had happened; and so departing thence he returned to his dwelling. (117, 118)

The Old English version departs from the Latin text slightly in that the visitor, rather than Guthlac, rows to the point where he finds the leaf of parchment:

> Mid þy he þurh þa fenland reow, þa com he to sumum mere þe wel neah þæt egland wæs: þa wæs þær on middan þam mere sum hreod-bed; þa hangode seo carte on þam hreode efne swa hig monnes hand þær ahengce: and he sona þa bliþe feng to þære cartan, and he wundriende to þam Godes were brohte: and he þa se eadiga wer Guthlac sæde þæt þæt nære his geearnung ac Godes mildheortnys.

> When he had rowed through the fenland, then he came to a mere that was near the island. In the middle of that mere there was a bed of reeds, and there the charter hung on a reed even as if a man's hand had hung it there: and immediately he happily seized the charter, and wondering, brought it to the man of God. And he, the blessed man Guthlac, said that that was not (because of) his merit, but God's mercy. (50)

The reed and the water are deployed in this passage to demonstrate Guthlac's sainthood and connection to God. The reed of Guthlac's fen is described purely in terms of its ability to demonstrate Guthlac's saintliness.

Ecocritics use the term 'instrumental' to refer to a human-centered view in which natural phenomena are important only insofar as they are useful to humans in real life or have metaphorical force in literary works. The reed near Guthlac's hermitage functions instrumentally in that it is of interest only in its utility to Guthlac, in literal terms, in saving the material document that his visitor was writing, and in spiritual terms, in demonstrating Guthlac's superiority such that the plants bend themselves to his will. As described in Chapter 2, Beowulf takes a similarly instrumental view of the sea-creatures he slaughters while swimming with Breca.

In contrast, the Reed of *Exeter Book*, Riddle 60 speaks in its own voice and asks the reader to guess what creature it is, saying 'Ic wæs be sonde, sæwealle neah, / æt merefaroþe, minum gewunade / frumstaþole fæst' ('I was by the sand, near the sea-wall, on the waves, my dwelling a fixed original abode,' ll. 1-3). The Reed of Riddle 60 is made into a pipe, used to make music or send messages between men, so it is turned into something of utility to humans, but the start of the description locates it in its original dwelling, growing on its own terms. The riddle opens the possibility of a point of view that allows agency to the plant independent of human concerns. The human-centered view of the non-human world depicted in the various versions of the *Guthlac* narrative, that places other humans as well as plants and animals on a similar plane of utility to the saint, is counter-balanced in the *Exeter Book* riddles, demonstrating that a non-instrumentalizing perspective was a possibility for Anglo-Saxon writers and scribes. In the Guthlac narratives, however, everything is put to the service of a Christian narrative that elevates spiritual expression and the saintly behavior of the male hermit above all other considerations.

Felix gives further examples that depict the natural environment used instrumentally to demonstrate Guthlac's piety. Two crows are 'infesta,' ('hostile, mischievous,' 118) and make a habit of damaging and destroying Guthlac's possessions, but he reacts only with patience even though the

birds are 'velut inprobi praedones rapiebant' ('like shameless robbers,' 120). Felix depicts the crows in anthropomorphized terms, not by way of understanding them or their actions but simply in order to make a point about Guthlac's character. The passage might recall Guthlac's predation on the bodies of enemy soldiers, since crows, as members of an Anglo-Saxon audience would well have known, were carrion-eaters; the point seems to be to emphasize Guthlac's transformation in his devotion to God. Felix adds:

> Erga enim omnia eximiae caritatis ipsius gratia abundabat, in tantum ut incultae solitudinis volucres et vagabundi coenosae paludis pisces ad vocem ipsius veluti ad pastorem ocius natantes volantesque subvenirent; de manu enim illius victum, prout uniuscuiusque natura indigebat, vesci solebant. Non solum vero terrae aerisqac animalia illius iussionibus obtemperabant, immo etiam aqua aerque ipsi veri Dei vero famulo oboediebant.
> For the grace of his excellent charity abounded to all creatures, so that even the birds of the untamed wilderness and the wandering fishes of the muddy marshes would come flying or swimming swiftly to his call as if to a shepherd; and they were even accustomed to take from his hand such food as the nature of each demanded. Not only indeed did the creatures of the earth and sky obey his commands, but also even the very water and the air obeyed the true servant of the true God. (120, 121)

Although this seems to contradict the earlier narrative of hostile and predatory crows, Felix states outright that the non-human environment – encompassing animals as well as water and air – serves Guthlac as a demonstration of his devotion to God. The Old English abbreviates the description of the wicked crows as well as the passage that follows:

> na læs þæt an þæt him þa fugelas underþeodde wæron, ac eac swa þa fixas, and wilde deor þæs westenes ealle hi him hyrdon, and he hym dæghwamlice andlyfene sealde of his agenre handa, swa heora gecynde wæs.
> No less the one that the birds were subordinate to him, but also the same the fish, and wild animals of the wilderness all obeyed him, and he gave them food every day from his own hands, according to their kind.

The passage condenses Felix's longer discussion of Guthlac's dominion over the earth. According to Felix, earth and sky, water and air, birds and fish obey the commands of Guthlac. The Old English translator eliminates

earth and sky from the entities that obey Guthlac, but emphasizes that the animals that Guthlac feeds are not domesticated but wild, a detail absent from the corresponding Latin passage. The fact that the Old English translation elides the intractable crows eliminates an apparent contradiction in the Latin *Vita* to make Guthlac's dominion over the wild animals even more complete.

Both Felix and the translator of the Old English version use landscape alongside animals and material objects to demonstrate Guthlac's saintliness. They do not suggest that Guthlac should be in any way accountable to the environment around him, whether the earth in which he builds his hermitage, the crows that harass him, or the reeds that hold up the document his visitor has been writing. Moreover, the landscape is static in Guthlac's occupation. Felix states that Guthlac first moved to his refuge on St. Bartholomew's day, 'aestivus temporibus' ('in the summer time,' 88, 89), and that Guthlac took ill shortly before Easter after several years have gone by. But there is no depiction of changing seasons or of any other shifts in the landscape that Guthlac occupies. In terms of Buell's early articulation of what kinds of texts fit a canon of environmental literature, the *Vita Guthlaci* does not belong. Its failure to show landscape as changing in any way demonstrates that texts that avoid presenting the environment as existing in any fashion independent of human concerns are not recent innovations, and that it is possible for Anglo-Saxon authors and audiences to 'read' landscape in this way, despite the fact that they live in what later periods have romanticized as a pastoral environment.

Britons as/and Demons

When he takes up residence 'inter nubilosos remotioris heremi' ('amid the gloomy thickets of that remote desert,' 90, 91), Guthlac arms himself once again, in spiritual terms that echo his actual taking up of arms as a youth:

> Deinde praecinctus spiritualis armis adversus teterrimi hostis insidias scutum fidei, loricam spei, galeam castitatis, arcum patientiae, saggitas psalmodiae, sese in aciem firmans, arripuit.
> Then, girding himself with spiritual arms against the wiles of the foul foe, he took the shield of faith, the breastplate of hope, the helmet of chastity, the bow of patience, the arrows of psalmody, making himself strong for the fight. (90, 91)

Guthlac is repeatedly attacked by demons in various forms, in echoes of passages adapted from other saints' lives as well as of Jesus' battle with demons in the wilderness. Three of these demonic descriptions are of particular interest from a post-colonial, ecocritical perspective. In one of the earlier attacks, demons that Felix characterizes as 'teterrimus inmundorum spirituum catervis' ('horrible troops of foul spirits,' 100-03) fill Guthlac's hermitage. They have many human characteristics but are deformed or monstrous in form:

> Erant enim aspect truces, forma terribiles, capitibus magnis, collis longis, macilenta facie, lurido vultu, squalida barba, auribus hispidis, fronte torva, trucibus oculis, ore foetido, dentibus equineis, gutture flammivomo, faucibus tortis labro lato, vocibus horrisonis, comis obustis, buccula crassa, pectore arduo, femoribus scabris, genibus nodatis, cruribus uncis, talo tumido plantis aversis ore patulo, clamoribus raucisonis.
> For they were ferocious in appearance, terrible in shape with great heads, long necks, thin faces, yellow complexions, filthy beards, shaggy ears, wild foreheads, fierce eyes, foul mouths, horses' teeth, throats vomiting flames, twisted jaws, thick lips, strident voices, singed hair, fat cheeks, pigeon breasts, scabby thighs, knotty knees, crooked legs, swollen ankles, splay feet, spreading mouths, raucous cries. (100, 102)

The passage follows a typical medieval sequence in describing a human figure by starting with the head and working toward the feet, though the details of 'spreading mouths [and] raucous cries' are out of sequence. Aside from 'horses' teeth' and 'pigeon breasts,' these demons have entirely human-like features, though described in terms of filth, illness, and deformity. The Old English translation follows the Latin closely, though the Anglo-Saxon translator uses doubled terms of opprobrium for emphasis, for example rendering the Latin 'squalida barba' ('filthy beards, shaggy ears') as 'fulice and orfyrme on heora beardum' ('foul and squalid in their beards,' 34).

Interestingly, the Old English translator renders 'gutture flammivomo' ('throats vomiting flames') as 'him wæron þa þrotan mid lege gefylde.' Rather than the more unambiguous word 'fyr' ('fire'), the translator (or possibly scribe) here uses a word that can mean either 'flames' or 'lies,' so that the demons could be understood as breathing fire, and thus monstrous in the way of the dragon in *Beowulf* – or, more mundanely, as having 'throats filled with lies.' The latter reading allows an interpretation of these demons as more human, a suggestion echoed by a passage three chapters later in which the demons much more clearly resemble humans.

Felix writes that in the time of King Coenred, the Britons, whom he calls 'infesti hostes Saxonici generis' ('implacable enemies of the Saxon race'), had been attacking the Mercians. The Saxons had been the invaders, in a war in which Guthlac had been an apparently enthusiastic participant, yet in casting the Britons as 'infesti hostes,' Felix implies that they had been the aggressors and that the Mercians had been justified in slaughtering them. In using the same adjective for both Britons and crows, Felix blurs the distinction between human and animal – to the detriment of Britons, but not of Anglo-Saxons. Guthlac hears a crowd approach his hermitage and recognizes them as Britons based on their 'strimulentas loquelas' ('sibilant speech,' 108-11). He prays, uttering the beginning of Psalm 68 (67), 'velut prophetico' ('as if prophetically,' 110, 111). Felix does not include the text of the psalm; it begins 'Exsurgat Deus, et dissipentur inimici ejus' ('Let God arise, and let His enemies be destroyed,' Psalm 68: 1). The Old English version is quite similar; it omits reference to the 'sibilant' quality of the demons' speech, but refers to them specifically as 'British':

> Guðlac … gehyrde he mycel werod þara awyrgedra gasta on bryttisc sprecende, and he oncneow and ongeat heora gereorda for þam he ær hwilon mid him wæs on wrace.
> Guthlac … heard a great troop of the cursed troop speaking in British, and he knew and understood their language because earlier he had been among them for a while as an exile. (42)

The earlier section describes the demons as humanoid, yet is ambiguous about their actual humanity, allowing an interpretation of monstrosity. This passage clearly identifies the demons harassing Guthlac with human opponents of the Mercians.

Two chapters later, Felix, followed by the Old English translator, describes demons in the form of a herd of wild animals. Felix characterizes them as 'variorum monstrorum' ('various monsters,' 114, 115), while the Old English translator changes this to 'wildeora and wurma' ('wild animals and dragons,' 46). Guthlac is threatened by a lion with 'dentibus sanguineis' ('bloody teeth,' 114, 115) rendered in old English as 'blodigum tuxum' ('bloody tusks,' Goodwin 48) as well as by a bull, a bear, wolves and ravens, and snakes. Felix's use of 'monstrorum' might, then, be better translated as 'portents' or even 'unusual things' – as bears and bulls and lions would indeed be in the East Anglian fenlands.

The identification of demons as Britons – or of Britons as demons (?) (O'Brien O'Keeffe 2003: 21) recalls Guthlac's earlier life as a warrior; a further

echo is generated by the comment that he recognizes their speech from his sojourn among them, which must have been during his war years, because he went from childhood to being a warrior to being a monk. As O'Brien O'Keeffe writes, 'While it is perfectly clear from both the chapter heading and the conclusion of this chapter that Guthlac's persecutors here are demons, not men, they are presented throughout the narrative as a real, encroaching army, closing in through the swamp, burning and killing' (2003: 21).

The scenes in which the hermitage is imaged as occupied by demons echo the scenes of battle earlier in the narrative in the ways that they construct Guthlac as righteous in his aggressions against his neighbors. Guthlac slaughters Britons in the quest for political control over Mercia. He encounters the traces of inhabitants who might have been Britons when he first approaches the 'untracked' island on which he will make his hermitage. After he has retreated there alone, he has visions of demons with the voices of Britons. As O'Brien O'Keeffe has argued, 'Felix's *Vita S. Guthlaci* is first and foremost a discourse of contested territory fundamentally altered through acquisition, purgation, and habitation.... Through Penwalh, and indeed Guthlac himself, Felix firmly imbricates his narrative in the geographic and political struggles in Southumbria of the later seventh century' (2001: 3-4). The various versions of the *Life* attempt to cast Guthlac's occupation as a religious retreat to a desert, but details that emphasize colonizing political contexts of the period continually reassert themselves. Conflation of the literal battles of Guthlac's warrior years with the spiritual battles of his time in the hermitage has the effect of legitimating the territorial battles of Mercian, Anglo-Saxon invaders against the native Britons who, in Felix's narrative, are the ones 'harassing' the Anglo-Saxons. Casting Guthlac's battle for possession of his fenland hermitage in terms of battles against hordes of demons rather than against human inhabitants of the place normalizes the subjugation of others, because demons are by definition evil. A hermit's victory over the temptations and tortures of demons becomes evidence of devotion to God, in a paradigm that obscures any possibility of negative interpretation. The fenland possession battle is juxtaposed, in Felix's narrative, with the battle against the Britons, earlier inhabitants of the land that the Angles and Saxons are in the process of colonizing. As O'Brien O'Keeffe further argues, 'Felix's particular deformations of the discourse of the desert produces the fen as a theatre of political anxiety, as a place to stage the meeting of unimaginable difference and to produce the result in the comforting choreography of Christian triumphalism' (2001: 25). The identification of demons with Britons collapses distinctions

between Guthlac's political battles as the invader and his spiritual contest with the demons he, or Felix, imagines as his tempters and opponents. As Siewers argues, 'such issues of ethnicity are relevant to descriptions of the Fens in Felix as a last refuge for the demonic spirits he associates with the Britons, as well as to the description of the landscape of the Fens themselves' (2003: 12). The religious narrative of Guthlac's withdrawal as a hermit conceals colonizing ethnic politics.

The narrative about Guthlac's move to the hermitage simultaneously normalizes human dominion and power over animals and the non-sentient world, and depicts it as a Christian value. Guthlac's power over non-human creatures extends to the small wild animals native to the fenlands as well as over the demons that are depicted as 'unnatural,' aggressive beasts. Animals are cast as demonic others or as servants of the devout Guthlac, in either case depicted as dichotomously opposed to rather than aligned with humans on any kind of a continuum. The intertwining of human, monstrous and animal in depictions of the demonic, all opposed to Guthlac's privileged position in gender, class, and ethnic hierarchies, functions to establish a small class of people – 'englisc,' Christian, male, upper-class – in opposition to all others, with power over land, animals, and other people analogously legitimized through the idea of devotion to God as the highest of values.

Guthlac A and the 'beorg'

In addition to the Old English prose translation discussed above, Felix's *Vita Guthlaci* was adapted into two Old English poems, preserved as the second and third works in the poetic compilation known as the *Exeter Book*, which also includes the riddles discussed in the following two chapters. The second of the poems, known as *Guthlac B*, concerns Guthlac's death and ascendance to heaven, and draws more closely on Felix's *Vita* than does the first, *Guthlac A* (Roberts 1988: 2). But it does not include the sections of the *Vita* that concern Guthlac's retreat to the hermitage and Felix's depictions of the landscape he settles , or his interactions there with various other creatures.

Guthlac A, in contrast, contains passages corresponding to those in Felix's *Vita* and in the prose translation concerning Guthlac's occupation of the island and the attacks from demons. Following a description of heaven and an exhortation to readers to have faith so that they may attain it, *Guthlac A* begins the narrative of the saint at the point when Guthlac decides to become a hermit, eliminating the account of his early life and of his years

as a warrior. Many details of Guthlac's interactions with the environment and the demons that harass him are changed, but the sense of Guthlac as conqueror over the landscape and all of its occupants remains.

Defining the 'beorg' that Guthlac occupies in the poetic text has occupied much scholarly attention, with scholars arguing for either hill or grave mound. The 'tumulus' or 'hlaw' ('burial mound') of the *Vita* and the Old English prose translation is rendered in the poetic account as 'beorgseþel' (l. 102) and 'beorg' (ll. 148, 193, 209, etc.). Both Bosworth-Toller and J. R. Clark Hall translate 'beorgseþel' as 'mountain dwelling,' taking 'beorg' to mean 'mountain.' 'Beorg' can also mean 'barrow,' and the *Vita* and the Old English translation clearly refer to a burial mound on a low-lying island in the fens, but other passages in *Guthlac A* appear to describe Guthlac's hermitage as situated on a hill. The poem states that Guthlac became an example to many others in Britain 'siþþan biorg gestah' ('after he climbed the mountain,' l. 175b). Later in the poem the line is echoed when Guthlac tells the demons 'nu ic þis lond gestag' ('now I climbed this land,' l. 307b) and the narrator adds, 'he eft gestag / beorg on bearwe' ('he again climbed his hill in a grove,' ll. 428b-29a). The combination of 'biorg' with 'gestigan,' meaning 'to climb' or 'to descend' suggests that Guthlac's hermitage is on a hill or mountain rather than in a low-lying fenland grave mound. Beyond these references to climbing, however, there is little textual evidence within the poem itself to aid in interpretation.

Reichardt takes the 'beorg' to be a mountain and a 'symbol of interior spiritual achievement' (335); while Wentersdorf (1978) argues that 'beorg' is a direct translation of Felix's 'tumulus' and Shook takes the 'beorg' to be a fenland burial mound, 'perhaps of no great antiquity in Guthlac's time' (4). Jane Roberts points to the paucity of textual evidence within *Guthlac A*, arguing that 'there is not even any sufficiently explicit detail to allow firm identification of the *beorg* as "gravemound." … Overall the landscape of Guthlac A lacks sharp definition' (1988: 11). Reading *Guthlac A* in the context of Irish and Welsh texts, Siewers notes, like Roberts, the lack of specificity concerning the 'beorg,' and compares the hermitage of *Guthlac A* to Grendel's mere in *Beowulf* (2003: 2). He argues for a polysemous reading of the 'beorg:' 'The appositive meanings of *beorg*, pagan and Christian, were probably part of the intent of a poet whose theme rode a *mearclond* between different British landscapes' (Siewers 2003: 24). Clarke suggests that the passage casts the landscape as '*locus amoenus* or conventionally delightful landscape' (36) and 'a place of dual potential, for suffering and testing' (48), and argues that the exact meaning of 'beorg' is unimportant (47). Most recently, Johnson argues that Guthlac's hermitage undergoes a

transformation within the poetic narrative from mountain to a 'plain of victory' ('sigewong,' l. 742) in an echo of Isaiah 40: 4: 'Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low' (309-10).

Like the Latin *Vita* and the Old English translation, the poem depicts Guthlac's hermitage as a desert or wilderness:

> Wæs seo londes stow
> bimiþen fore monnum, oþþæt meotud onwrah
> beorg on bearwe, þa se bytla cwom
> se þær haligne ham arærde
> The place in the land was hidden from men until God uncovered a mound/hill in a wood, where the builder came, who there for the holy one raised a home. (ll. 146b-49)

As noted above, the prose versions similarly state that the region was unknown, but then introduce a man named Tatwine who showed it to Guthlac. The poem eliminates this contradiction by saying that God revealed the spot to Guthlac alone. The hermitage is 'on westenne' ('in the desert' or 'in the wilderness,' l. 209), and the wilderness is further characterized as vast ('wid is þes westen,' l. 296a). The region is wooded, like its counterpart in the *Vita*, but the poem nowhere refers to it as an island.

Genesis A similarly modifies a textually transmitted description of wilderness. In the biblical Genesis, God tells Abraham to take Isaac to a mountain ('montium,' Gen. 22: 2) in Moriah to slaughter him. In the Vulgate, there is no further description of the place. The Old English *Genesis A*, however, expands upon the text. The 'mountain' of the Latin becomes a 'steape dune' ('high mountain,' l. 2854) on the very edge of the highlands ('hrincg þæs hean landes,' l. 2855). Abraham and Isaac travel 'wegas ofer westen' ('paths over the wilderness,' l. 2875) that lead to 'steape dune… þæt he on hrofe gestod hean landes' ('a high mountain… so that he stood on the summit of the high land,' ll. 2897b, 2899). *Genesis A* adapts and elaborates on the Vulgate's 'montium,' emphasizing the terrain's remoteness and steep highlands.

This might reflect topographical reality as recounted by Anglo-Saxon pilgrims, traders or other travelers who had been to Rome across the Alps. Such a crossing, whether on foot or on the back of a mule or horse, would require crossing difficult terrain far from settlements of any size. The only surviving record of a journey between England and Rome during the Anglo-Saxon period is that recording the return itinerary of the Archbishop Sigeric in 990, which records that he traveled from Italy over the St. Bernard

Pass at 8110 feet into the Rhone Valley of what is now Switzerland and thence across France, eventually arriving at the English Channel (Ortenburg passim). The Romans had constructed a road through the pass by 47 CE. Saint Bernard built a hospice in the pass to help travelers, but not until the eleventh century, though there were likely earlier travelers' refuges, if not in the pass itself then on the approaches to it from either side.

Beowulf is located in Denmark, not England, and so in geographically remote terrain; there is no prose source or analogue with which to compare the poetic treatment of the landscape. But to an even greater extent than England, Denmark is flat country; with a high point of 568 feet and numerous islands, it resembles, as Siewers has pointed out, Guthlac's fenland. Yet at some point in the transmission of the narratives about Beowulf and his foes, the landscape Grendel and his mother inhabit is re-imagined as a deserted, craggy wasteland. The pool through which their underground lair is accessed lies in terrain characterized by steep cliffs and sharp drops. Hrothgar tells Beowulf that Grendel and his mother occupy 'wulfhleoþu, windige næssas' ('wolf-hills, windy headlands,' l. 1358); a stream descends 'under næssa genipu' ('under the shadow of the cliff,' l. 1360). The transformation of remote landscape into wilderness highland in the adaptation of both *Genesis A* and *Guthlac A* as well as in *Beowulf* suggests that Anglo-Saxon authors and audiences imagine 'wilderness' as mountainous rather than marshy terrain. A burial mound can be climbed, but the references to ascending the 'beorg' suggest a hill of some size. The absence of any synonym in the poem for 'hill' or 'mountain,' however, (in contrast, for instance, to *Christ and Satan*, which includes references to 'hyll' and 'dun,' or *Genesis A*, which refers to 'dun,' 'heah land,' and 'hrofe [roof]') leaves the 'beorg' of *Guthlac A* open to both possible interpretations, as both barrow and mountain simultaneously.

Much as the prose versions deny that the hermitage is inhabited, but describe three previous layers of human use, the poem likewise suggests prior occupation of the hermitage by some 'feond' ('devil, enemy,' l. 136) who 'þær ær fela / setla gesæton' ('had made many settlements there earlier,' ll. 143b-44a). The poem then states, 'oft þær broga cwom / egeslic ond uncuð' ('terror often came there, fearsome and unknown,' ll. 140b-41a). Whatever 'feond' had previously occupied the place, whether human enemy or non-human demon, it is terrifying precisely because it is unknown. The demons, 'teonsmiðas tornes fulle' ('evil-doers, full of fury,' l. 205) are the other, much as the Britons are characterized as 'other' by the colonizing Saxons; characterizing demons as unknown contributes to characterizing unfamiliar human populations as demonic. The demons accuse Guthlac of occupying their refuge 'for wlence' ('because of pride,' l. 208). Demons are, categorically, liars, whose goal is to

trick Guthlac into giving up his devotion to God. Thus the claim that they are the rightful occupants of the land attains the predetermined status of outright falsehood. Yet the claim that the space is unoccupied and unknown, in conjunction with the acknowledgment that it was known to and occupied by the demons, recuperates the contradictions of tracked wilderness found in the Latin *Vita* and the Old English prose translation. Another trace of prior occupation for the 'beorg' comes in the narrator's comment that Guthlac's choice of that place for his hermitage was 'nales þy he giemde þurh gitsunga / lænes lifwelan' ('not at all because he cared, out of avarice, to obtain the riches of this world,' ll. 150-51a). This line points to the possibility that the 'beorg' is not a hill, but a grave after all, filled with grave-goods that Guthlac, the poem thus takes pains to point out, is not at all interested in obtaining.

Siewers argues that the text, following patristic thought, presents both the demonic previous occupants and nature itself as problematic:

> Somewhat paradoxically, Augustinian theological emphases on the corruption of nature, extended to natural landscape and its ancestral associations with indigenous culture, empowered the Anglo-Saxon ideological project of superimposing a new cultural landscape on Britain's most fertile land areas, in narrative landscapes based on a sense of Anglo-Saxon culture as God-chosen and hegemonic that erased textually the presence of earlier inhabitants as thoroughly as Old English linguistically replaced Romano-Celtic languages in those areas. The presence of indigenous Romano-Celtic linguistic cultures that were Christianized long before those of Anglo-Saxon realms, and which exerted a large continuing influence on the latter, was thus conveniently erased or subsumed (2003: 3).

Felix and his translators and adaptors into Old English prose and poetry drew on a long Christian Latin cultural tradition to enable colonial expansion, but also fused it with Germanic habits of invasion and plunder and forged a new synthesis that justified the Anglo-Saxons as the rightful possessors of territory formerly held by Britons using Christian faith as the measure of suitability.

Conclusion

The refuge to which Guthlac retreats to seek solitude is transformed between Felix's *Vita* and *Guthlac A* from the East Anglian fenland to an apparently mountainous desert consistent with other Old English literary depictions

of wilderness. But the assumptions that govern Guthlac's appropriation of the place remain constant across the Latin and Old English texts. While the space has clearly seen previous occupation, calling it 'uncultivated' makes a cultural claim asserting the superiority simultaneously of Mercians over Britons and Saint Guthlac over pagans. As Siewers argues, Augustinian theology is behind Guthlac's colonizing of the fen, but Felix merged Christian textual heritage with Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. 'In the textualizing, and resulting distancing, of the natural and the spiritual, Augustine's writings helped shape the theme of environmental utilitarianism so important in Western culture, which emerged early in Anglo-Saxon literature for reasons of political ideology' (2003: 8).

In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar's queen, Wealhtheow, is sometimes read as a Welsh queen who has married him in an attempt to establish peace between their communities, suggesting the possibility of inter-group ties. But in the *Vita Guthlaci*, Felix depicts groups of people other than those of Guthlac's 'tribe' as completely insignificant beneath Guthlac's masculine and Christian concerns, first to demonstrate his martial prowess and then to show his saintly nature in the hermitage. The ideas that enabled empirical expansion, the subjugation of people outside of Europe, the destruction of land and the unrestrained slaughter of animals, are deeply embedded in English culture, preceding actual colonization outside of Europe by several centuries, and enabling and justifying later colonial aggressions. The idea that land, animals, and other humans are available for English conquest is not a side effect or a 'bug' of territorial expansion, but a precondition for that expansion. Huggan and Tiffin describe their own hopes for their study of post-colonial ecocriticism:

> In reaching out across languages and cultures, postcolonial ecocriticism is paradoxically driven – as is this book – by the impossibility of its own utopian ambitions: to make exploitation and discrimination of all kinds, both human and nonhuman, visible in the world; and, in so doing, to help make them obsolete. (Huggan-Tiffin 16)

The imagined wildernesses of Anglo-Saxon texts set the stage for colonial expansion. Imagining these 'wild' lands as more thoroughly distant from actual Anglo-Saxon experience aids in conceiving of them as impervious to cultivation and therefore devoid of human habitation. But even viewed from geographically and temporally closer standpoints, as in Felix's *Vita* written soon after Guthlac's death, land and its occupants are presented as justifiably occupied in the twin visions of Christian piety and Anglo-Saxon

military goals which, combines, are deployed to legitimate foreign occupation and territorial expansion. The oral, documentary, and literary traditions that informed the various versions of Guthlac's life allow for constructions of population and environment that suggest that it is normal for lands, animals, and peoples to be subjugated for utilitarian purposes.

The two chapters that follow move from epic and biblical poetry to the *Exeter Book* riddles. The paradigms of human domination that suffuse *Andreas*, *Beowulf*, *Exodus*, *Genesis*, and *Guthlac* are reversed, if only briefly, to open doors to a different possible construction of the environment and human interactions with it. The riddles take on the voices of animals, trees, and ore from the earth that are transformed into objects used by humans; humans are described as the enemy and are othered by the texts of the *Exeter Book* riddles. In Chapter 6, I extend Timothy Morton's notion of hyperobject, which he coined as a way of thinking about climate change, to social constructions, examining how objects are metaphorically cast as humans and humans reduced to objects and revisiting the ecofeminist philosophies explored in Chapter 2. I explore the intersections among ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and object-centered philosophies to show how the literature of the Anglo-Saxons anticipates and even directly articulates hierarchical and hegemonic positions that still persist in contemporary European and North American cultural formations about the priority of some humans over others.