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Dominion and Stewardship: Unpacking Environmental Consciousness in Some Old English Saints' Lives

Margaret Tedford
mtedford01@qub.ac.uk
ORCID: 0000-0003-4494-521X

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by Margaret Tedford

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Abstract

This article explores how ideas of environmental consciousness are explored within two Old English prose versions of The Life of St Cuthbert, *alongside an Old English poem* Guthlac A *and a Latin version of* The Life of St Guthlac. *It seeks to challenge the assumptions of monolithic belief in the early medieval period and to situate an ecocritical analysis within the context of contemporary focus on the Anthropocene. The article analyses episodes of interaction between the human and non-human in the texts, reading them through this dual lens. It argues for a complexity of beliefs regarding man and nature in the early medieval period that is characterised by a theology of both dominion and duty of care.*

Keywords: environment, theology, religion, Old English, literature, saints

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About the Author

Margaret Tedford completed her PhD at Queen's University Belfast in 2019. Her thesis was a comparative study of the eleventh-century Cotton map and its contexts. She has previously published on maps, geography, and landscape perception in early medieval England, and worked as an assistant to Dr. Marilina Cesario on the British Academy-funded Crossing Frontiers Research Network project in 2018-2019. Her current research interests are in the history of cartography and emotional and cognitive geographies.

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Introduction: Understanding Environmental Consciousness Before the Anthropocene

This paper seeks to explore the concept of environmental consciousness in an early medieval English context. As such, I must take some time here in an attempt to define what may be understood by "environmental consciousness" and whether conceptions of this idea differ between the modern day and the early medieval world of these texts. The idea of "environmental consciousness" is perhaps deliberately vague; it could mean a variety of things to many different people in different contexts. However, in the modern Western world, it might be seen as primarily encompassing not a consciousness of the environment as such, but rather a consciousness of environmental *change*. Such change is typically for the worse and occurs with humankind as the main proponents behind it. This idea of environmental consciousness is a significant marker of what has become known as the Anthropocene. In his 2013 article on the Anthropocene for *Smithsonian* magazine, Joseph Stromberg quotes the renowned journalist Andrew Revkin on one of the perceived distinctive characteristics of the new epoch: "We're the first species that's become a planet-scale influence and is aware of that reality. That's what distinguishes us." Campaigners such as Revkin see human awareness of their own environmental impact as one of the clearest markers of the Anthropocene, and in many ways such a focus on a new epoch serves the purposes of creating a sense of urgency in addressing the scale of damage caused to global ecology by humans. However, to assume that this sense of environmental consciousness also applies to earlier periods is a mistake; to go expressly looking for modern ideas of environmental impact in medieval (and earlier) texts fails to account for the cultural specificity of such ideas. Fikret Berkes, in his book *Sacred Ecology* (2012), argues for the cultural idiosyncrasies of "traditional ecological knowledge" among many native and non-Western communities (2). Yet the cultural

specificity of environmental awareness is not exclusive to anthropological study, nor to the study of "primitive" cultures, but should be considered as a key aspect of any community's engagement with their environment. Similarly, Stephen Hussey and Paul Thompson (2004) argue that different communities will have different experiences of their environment; for example, for those living with the threat of natural disaster, the "environment" is not a romanticized notion but a real and threatening presence in daily life (11). If we are able to realize that there may be such a range of environmental "consciousnesses" among different communities in the modern world, we must also realize that the communities of the past had different perceptions about their natural environment and the possible threat it posed. As such, any research into historical environmental consciousness must begin with a willingness to understand this idea within its historical and cultural context. Hussey and Thompson trace the beginnings of the modern idea of environmental consciousness as a precursor to "activism," an awareness of environmental change leading in turn to an awareness of a need to enact countermeasures against such change. Their study finds that the origins of these ideas can be traced back only as far as early modern writings of complaint about pollution in cities (2). In order to look at early medieval English conceptions in their own right, I am beginning with a more broad definition of environmental consciousness as I do not believe that we can argue for the same awareness of environmental *change* in Old English texts, but rather an awareness of the environment (or the 'natural' world) as a whole and man's place within it. Thus, for there to be an "awareness" of the environment, there must be some engagement with the role of the physical world and its relationship with humankind.

Such a broad, and perhaps simplistic, definition is in contrast to general usage of the phrase in modern society; it perhaps challenges the centrality of the Anthropocene in contemporary environmental discourse, which consciously serves the ideals of activism; it is actively *trying* to be humanity's "wake-up call." My purpose in this discussion is not so much to take issue with this idea itself but to explore how it affects the work of scholars researching pre-modern societies and look at what "environmental consciousness" might mean within such a pre-modern context. The focus on the Anthropocene in contemporary environmental discourse raises particular issues for historians and other scholars working in the medieval period. The "Anthropocene" is another periodizing category whose discourse, as we saw above, self-consciously argues for monumental change or break in human and environmental history. This might have the (perhaps unintended) consequence of further emphasizing a perceived split between the medieval and the modern in both environmental and cultural terms, and in alienating pre-modern scholarship and ecocriticism from contemporary environmental debates. It

must be noted that the debate over where to delineate the beginning of the proposed Anthropocene is ongoing, with some scholars proposing a twentieth-century date and others a much earlier one based on the impact of the growth of ancient human agriculture (Monastersky 2015). It is not my intention to enter into such a debate here but to suggest a measure of caution in adopting a framework in historical scholarship that privileges difference over continuity. My aim is to examine examples of early medieval environmental consciousness through looking at saints' lives and their explicit Christian worldview in their historical context. In doing so, I aim to show how these texts express a complex tension between the ideas of dominion and stewardship in their approach to human interaction with the environment. I consider how a reassessment of such sources may influence our perception of both the role of religious belief and the place of medieval thought in the history of environmentalism. Western Christianity is an explicitly anthropocentric religion where humanity is the most important and privileged of God's creations, yet as we shall see, a variety of beliefs have existed throughout Christian history regarding humanity's relationship with and responsibility toward the natural world. In my discussion, I choose to focus more on the idea of "anthropocentrism" in environmental thought rather than the epoch of the "Anthropocene," as I believe this enables a better engagement with the trajectory of belief systems across history, with an awareness of both continuity and change.

Controversial Ties: Christianity and Environmentalism

Recent concerns over the global ecological crisis have spurred a re-evaluation of the relationship between the physical world and human spirituality among many theologians and Christian philosophers. Dana L. Robert's (2011) essay on environmentalism in Christian mission argues that "In an era of ecological degradation and concern for the future of the planet, Christians are busy reframing their relationship with nature" (126–27). In the last decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, authorities from a variety of Christian denominations have expressed a belief that environmental concerns form part of the "Christian mission." In 1979, Pope John Paul II declared St Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology and asserted that Christians have a duty "to restore to creation all its original value" (Robert 2011, 123), an opinion which appears to have reached its full potential in statements by Pope Francis in 2015. The Pope issued an encyclical letter (2015) on the topic of "Care for Our Common Home," calling upon Catholics and world politicians alike to address the issues of climate change. Protestant denominations have followed in arguing for a "Christian responsibility toward the earth" (Robert 2011, 123). However, Robert's brief overview of the history of Christian attitudes towards the natural world, while demonstrating that a kind of

philosophy of engagement with the environment has existed throughout Christian history, reveals that there does not exist a single overarching "Christian" interpretation of humanity's role in the physical environment.

While the fields of ecocriticism and environmental humanities have typically been viewed as the products of a secular worldview, scholars such as Judith Adler (2006), in her "Cultivating Wilderness: Environmentalism and Legacies of Early Christian Asceticism," have pointed out the prevalence of engagement with religious ideas in environmentalist criticism (4). Attitudes towards Christian influence on human interaction with the natural world vary widely among the various strains of environmentalism. In a practical sense, many secular-minded environmental scientists and campaigners have been forced to realize the weight of influence religious teaching exerts on many communities around the world (Palmer and Finlay 2013, 6–8). This kind of local knowledge, rooted in a local culture and belief system, poses challenges to many globalist environmental initiatives but can be seen to have the potential to be the key to such initiatives' success. As Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay state, "We all want to change the world for the better. The question is, whose world is it and how can it be changed? We live in many worlds" (8). In our contemporary world we are forced to acknowledge that a great diversity of belief systems exists simultaneously, and that beliefs even within a single religion vary widely, often existing in perpetual paradox. However, when one comes to the criticism on the history of Christian belief and its influence on the environment, we typically confront a portrayal, particularly with regard to medieval Christianity, of a monolithic belief system. Lynn White's (1996) seminal essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," viewed medieval Christianity as a proponent of an exploitative ethos, one where all creation existed simply to serve man and his needs (9–11). Christianity is presented in direct opposition to a supposedly "environmentally friendly" paganism with its animistic beliefs (White 1996, 10; Merchant 1980, 2). White does make the concession that "Christianity is a complex faith, and its consequences differ in differing contexts" (10), but this concession only goes as far as suggesting that there may be differences in Eastern Greek theology and that of the Latin West. This tendency to characterize "medieval" Latin Christianity as a static, monolithic entity is a limiting assumption of periodization that has led in many cases to a sort of "villainization" of the medieval period in terms of environmentalism. White argues for a belief in dualism and domination, "Man and nature are two things, and man is master" (8), that is not challenged until the appearance of St Francis, who White sees as a singular radical (13). White states that "What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship" (12), and there is little to disagree with in such a statement. However, it is the assumption that "man" and "nature" are easily and

consistently defined that hinders the argument. In their book *Contested Natures*, Phil Macnaghten and John Urry (1998) begin by attempting to provide a "brief historical sketch of the changing interpretations of human/nature relations," arguing for the complexity and difficulty in defining the word "nature" in English (8). However, the brief overview of medieval thought that manages to cover up to the sixteenth century in a few pages fails to properly interrogate what is meant by "nature" in the period, again presenting medieval thought on the matter as largely coherent and consistent. Richard C. Hoffman's (2008) work, "Homo et Natura, Homo in Natura: Ecological Perspectives on the European Middle Ages," begins with the basic assumption that, in medieval thought, man is separate from nature and rules over nature, but is one of the few to make the point that, "from that consensus different medieval thinkers drew implications as divergent as today's stereotypical *Homo ecologius*, conserving steward, and *Homo devastanes*, planetary bane" (11). The Christian worldview, though its debt to the account in Genesis cannot be denied, is fluid and allows a great deal of room for interpretation. As recently as 2015, Pope Francis' encyclical on climate change addressed this issue of the Christian need to reconcile man's "dominion" with environmental responsibility:

> The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man "dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures . . . our "dominion" over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship. (II.67, III.116)

The Pope's admission that there have been "wrong" interpretations of this passage demonstrates that a variety of views have persisted throughout history. What is particularly interesting is his assertion that "dominion" can be equated with "stewardship," a point that in fact is addressed in some of the texts I will examine later on. In turn, Hoffman's work may stand out as encouraging a more nuanced view of medieval Christian perspectives on the natural world, and in encouraging medieval historians to acknowledge the presence and agency of "nature" in medieval culture, but it fails to address the interpretation of *natura* and jumps between twelfth and fifteenth

century perspectives with little context and omission of any prior material entirely (2008, 11–13).

While we have introduced ideas of "dominion" and "stewardship" in the theological framework in which they are most explicit, these ideas have come to have resonance outside of theological arguments. The question of humanity's *right* and/or *responsibility* in environmental conservation approaches is one that is inherently bound up with current discourse on the Anthropocene. Reinhold Leinfelder (2020), in his discussion of the Anthropocene, argues that because it has become apparent that humanity is an ecological force, a power over the earth, the responsibility for caring for the environment also lies with humanity: "The main challenge of the Anthropocene concept is actually the insight into a completely new ethical relationship with the Earth: Everything I and others do has an effect on the Earth system . . . Each individual and all communities are therefore responsible" (6). This proposed new ethical relationship is in fact influenced by ideas that are much older; the ethics of human involvement in the environment is centered around the implications of human power—a power to destroy or to protect, and in many cases, to do both with the same hand. As Heide Estes (2017) notes in her introduction to *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes*, the ideas that enable human exploitation of the natural world and those that wish to protect it were already in circulation in early medieval England, and we have to come to terms with the long reach of these ideas to fully grapple with their influence in contemporary society (32).

It is certainly not *wrong* to suggest that a doctrine of man's dominion over the created earth existed in the medieval period, but to argue that it was the only doctrine, or that it was accepted without challenge, is an assumption that closes off our possible understanding of the complexity and variety of beliefs in the period. In the first place, I wish to examine the term "nature" a bit more closely with reference to usage specifically within an early medieval English context, before exploring certain textual examples of reclusive or "hermit" saints extant in the period. These kinds of saints typically abandon the locales of human society for a period and live alone in what might be termed a "natural" environment, or a kind of "wilderness," thus providing fascinating insight into different ways that the natural world and man's relationship to it were articulated within a clearly theological framework.

Confusing Nature: Early Medieval Understandings of the Term

While environmentalist criticism may be seen to largely ignore early medieval literature, until very recently the same in reverse might have been said for literary scholars. However, in the past couple of decades, ecocritical approaches to medieval literature have moved into the mainstream of scholarship with an increased focus on spatiality and

the non-human.[1] Jennifer Neville (2006), in *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, discusses what she terms "the natural world," but makes it clear that there exists no such term in the Old English language (1). Instead, their terms such as *cynd* stem from the Latin *natura* as defined by Isidore of Seville (1 n.5) as "characteristic" or "natural qualities" (1–2). In his cosmographical account in *De Natura Rerum*, "On the Nature of Things," Bede follows Isidore. Writing in Latin, he uses the term *natura* only to refer to the "natural qualities" of the entities and phenomena he describes. In this scientific approach to describing the known cosmos, there is no man-nature dichotomy in the way we might understand today. Obviously, this is placed within a Christian framework, so "Creation" is *everything* that exists in the *mundus*, which though often translated as "the world," really refers to the "universe." A division is acknowledged between the "heavens" (*caelum*, *firmamentum*), the "earth" (*terra*), and sometimes the "waters" or oceans (*aqua*, *mare*). In the Old English language, *sceaft* typically refers to the entirety of Creation, and *middangeard* to "the earth" rather than the universe. Thus, while having terms to refer to specific organisms or phenomena within the "natural world," there is no term for the whole of these things, external to humanity or to the supernatural/spiritual world (Neville 2006, 2). This makes our attempt to define the man-nature relationship even more difficult in an Old English context, and challenges our assumptions about divisions between these conceptual "worlds." Nonetheless, I think it is possible to use the phrase "the natural world" as Neville does, with caution and taking into account its limitations.

Saints and Their Place in the Early Medieval Ecosystem: The Examples of Cuthbert and Guthlac

The first of the two saints I intend to look at is the famous St Cuthbert, about whom two primary works are relevant from the period—a seventh-century anonymous account of his life by a monk of Lindisfarne, and a similar prose account by Bede in the eighth century (Colgrave 1940, 2, 13–16). Cuthbert's *vita* features several miracle stories that concern animals and the natural world. In one instance, Cuthbert is taking one of his nightly walks along the seashore when some sea animals appear and minister to him: "there followed in his footsteps two little sea animals, humbly prostrating themselves on the earth; and, licking his feet, they rolled upon them, wiping them with their skins and warming them with their breath" (Colgrave 1940, 80–81). Bede's *Life* relates the same story but specifies that the animals were otters (Colgrave 1940, 190–91). Dominic Alexander (2008) has viewed this story as "an allegory of the gentle yoke the saint lays upon those who recognize his spiritual authority. At the core of the story, in terms of animal miracles, is the symbolism of divine hierarchy, rather than any mystic connection

to or affectionate regard for animals" (46). While there is certainly this element of symbolism and spiritual lesson, it is interesting that non-human creatures partake in a Christian ritual of feet washing. This at once serves to assert their submission to the saint's authority and their capacity for participating in religious ritual, which implies a degree of cognition and spiritual essence. This narrative both expresses the dominion of the Christian saint over the non-human world and that the non-human has the capacity to act in a similar manner to a human supplicant, however notably without speech.

Other miracles include the miraculous provision of food, once in the form of ready-sliced dolphin flesh during a storm, interestingly exactly the amount to fill them and no more (Colgrave 1940, 82–83, 194–95), and in another, through a fish provided by an eagle: "he looked up to heaven and saw an eagle flying in the sky and said to his boy: 'This is the eagle which the Lord has instructed to provide us with food to-day'" (86–87, 196–97). Cuthbert insists on sharing the fish with the eagle, and again the amount of food is sufficient for all parties, including the eagle. There is an element of sustainability in divine food provision it would appear, and this is repeated in the divinely sourced water supply on Cuthbert's retreat on Farne: "the grace of the Giver so controlled it that it did not exceed the necessities of the receiver, nor was the supply for those necessities ever lacking" (218–19). The divine ideal is thus presented not only as a complete dependence on God, but as a sustainable form of living where there is enough for both humanity and created creatures.

It is true that in many instances the authors of these lives of Cuthbert took pains to assert the saint's control over his natural environment. Bede in particular stresses a belief that the spiritual state achieved by saints like Cuthbert recreates a prelapsarian divine hierarchy: "if a man faithfully and wholeheartedly serves the maker of all created things, it is no wonder though all creation should minister to his commands and wishes. But for the most part we lose dominion over the creation which was made subject to us, because we ourselves neglect to serve the Lord and Creator of all things" (Colgrave 1940, 224–25). Bede similarly expresses this belief in his commentary on Genesis: "It is not proper to ask why man does not still rule over all living creatures, for after he would not submit himself to his Creator, he lost dominion over those whom the Creator had subjected to his jurisdiction" (Kendall 2008, 94). He then references how certain saints were rendered obedient by birds, while others "have been spared from the yawning jaws of wild beasts" (Kendall 2008, 94). These saints, through their spiritual devotion, are able to achieve an echo or recreation of the dominion of man that typified the Edenic creation. It is clear that these saints evoke an ideal, and that the perceived reality of a post-Fall creation was one where humankind became subject to the control of (often unpleasant) natural forces that threaten their survival (Neville 2006, 21–22).

Another story in the life of Cuthbert tells of two ravens that are destroying his roof. When he tells them to stop and they fail to listen, he banishes them in the name of Christ:

> Without any pause or delay, they deserted their homes according to his command, but after three days, one of the two returned to the feet of the man of God as he was digging the ground, and settling above the furrow with outspread wings and drooping head, began to croak loudly, with humble cries asking his pardon and indulgence. And the servant of Christ recognizing their penitence gave them pardon and permission to return. (Colgrave 1940, 102–3)

Bede specifies that Cuthbert understood what the raven meant (224–25), and expresses a belief that spiritual lessons can be learned from animals: "Let it not seem absurd to anyone to learn a lesson of virtue from birds, since Solomon says: 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise'" (224–25). In a similar way to the sea animals mentioned in the earlier story, the ravens partake in the Christian ritual of repentance and forgiveness, and are in a way almost anthropomorphized. It is interesting that they are shown as having a form of speech, though clearly not human language, that the saint can understand. Modern environmental criticism often argues that this medieval Christian attitude of "learning from nature," combined with a supposed destruction of animistic belief, resulted in natural phenomena with "no autonomous voice" (Manes 1996, 20). It is true that these depictions of animals in hagiographical texts are articulated within a discourse of divine Christian meaning, but in the case of the ravens and Cuthbert, the ravens are shown as making a choice to submit to this system. They have a voice and agency. The fact that the saint (and perhaps only him) can understand their voice suggests more than a simple hierarchy of being. It suggests an ideal of unity within creation, that a human being's closeness to the divine also brings them closer to the entities within the created world. The suggestion is subtle but its articulation alongside perhaps more conventional doctrines of hierarchy has important implications for how we conceive of early medieval Christianity.

Another example of an English hermit saint of the period is the seventh century saint Guthlac. Accounts of his life are found in both prose and verse—in the prose Latin version by Felix in the eighth century and in Old English verse in a manuscript of the tenth century. Guthlac desires to "make his way to the desert" (Colgrave 1956, 86–87). Obviously there is no "desert" in England, but he chooses another kind of wilderness in the East Anglian fens, "a most dismal fen of immense size . . . 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 torturous streams" (86–87). He settles

on the island of Crowland, which "remained untilled and known to a very few," and where one could dwell because of its inhabitation by demons (88–89). Guthlac's dwelling is described in the poetic version as a *westen*, "wilderness," *dygle stow*, "a hidden place," and a *mearclond*, a "borderland" (Muir 2007, l. 208, 158–59, 174). If we note the similarity of this language to certain parts of *Beowulf* which describe Grendel and his abode (Fulk et al. 2008, *mearcstapa*, "borderland wanderer," l. 103; *dygel lond*, "secret or hidden land," l. 1357) we can see the associations it might have with evil and an unpleasant landscape. This seems totally incongruous with other descriptions of Guthlac's dwelling, such as *þone grenan wong*, "the green field," and *leofestan eardе on eorðan*, "beloved dwelling on earth" (Muir 2007, l. 477, 427–28). It is a place populated by demons, yet the very reason the demons do not want to leave is because it is green and pleasant and gives them rest for a space of time (l. 296–98, 205–14, 229–32). The demons "þurh nihta genipu neosan cwoman . . . hwæþre him þæs wonges wyn sweðrade," "came through the dark of night seeking . . . whether his joy in the place had abated" (l. 350, 352), and thus are more concerned with fighting Guthlac for possession of the *beorg* than for possession of his soul (Neville 2006, 127). Heide Estes (2017) discusses this text through a post-colonial ecocritical lens, exploring how attitudes to "wilderness" as uncivilized wasteland facilitate colonization (91–94). Guthlac's settlement can be read as privileging the human over the non-human, disregarding the location's prior occupation by non-human creatures and forces. At the same time, the theological dimensions to this location have additional resonances.

Catherine A.M. Clarke (2006) acknowledges ambiguity in the depiction of the setting: "The natural landscape in *Guthlac A* is clearly a place of dual potential, for suffering and testing, yet also for pleasure and delight" (48). I think this "dual potential" of the *beorg* applies not only to it being a place of interaction between the physical and spiritual realms but as a place that is both spatially and metaphorically situated with reference to the polar opposites of heaven and hell. The action of the poem is framed by references to the *ham in heofonum* (Muir 2007, l. 98), with the prologue mentioning other hermits who await heaven in their isolation (l. 95–98), and the final passage being concerned with Guthlac's soul returning to *fæder eðle*, "the paternal homeland," in heaven (l. 781–801). The *beorg* is thus part of his passage to heaven and so it can be transformed to share some of the pleasantness, the beauty of a kind of Paradise (l. 733–48). However, the other reference point of hell is also present. When the demons take Guthlac down to hell, it is described as:

> þær firenfula fæge gæstas

> æfter swyltcwale secan onginnað
> ingong ærest in þæt atule hus,
> niþer under næssas neole grundas. (l. 559–63)
> where doomed souls first begin, after the pangs of death, to seek entrance to that terrible house, down under the ground, the bottomless abyss.

The *beorg* is clearly not like the depiction of hell, but by its nature and associations it *could* be. Sarah Semple (2003) has discussed the illustrations of hell in the Harley 603 Psalter and other manuscripts, where hell is entered through hollow mounds similar to barrows and sinners are tormented by demons underground (240). In the lines quoted above, hell is clearly underground, just as heaven is depicted as being "up." The *beorg* thus occupies a liminal space between two opposites. It is spatially situated *between* the highest heights and lowest depths; it is raised and is in that respect reaching towards heaven, yet it may also have a hollow reaching deep into the earth where it is closer to hell. However, the liminality of the *beorg* is at the same time between metaphorical concepts—as part of the fallen creation it is neither perfect, like heaven, nor entirely damned, like hell. This ambiguity and complexity in location is part of an articulation of the complexity of the early medieval Christian view of the created world as it exists within the story of Fall and Redemption. The depiction in *Guthlac A* is a much more subtle and nuanced approach than, for example, Bede's assertion, seen earlier, that the Fall resulted in a loss of divine hierarchy. Instead, this text almost embraces liminality and paradox.

Felix's prose text is in many ways more straightforward than the poetic version, and strongly echoes material found in the prose lives of St Cuthbert. Guthlac exerts spiritual authority over two mischievous jackdaws but without the stern rebuke used by Cuthbert for the ravens (Colgrave 1940, 102–3): "This same servant of God bore their manifold injuries patiently and piously, so that the example of his patience was not only known among men but was clear even among birds and wild beasts" (Colgrave 1956, 120–21). In Felix's account, Guthlac demonstrates an even more intimate relationship with his natural surroundings. The saint is able to be an example to birds and beasts, creatures that are depicted here as having a certain capacity for reason and the reception of spiritual instruction. He is certainly in a position of authority but one that extends even beyond a dominion over animals: "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" (1956, 120–21). Felix quotes verbatim from Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert* on saintly control over the natural world and his articulation of the doctrine of prelapsarian hierarchy (1956, 120–21; 1940, 224–25). However, he also sets up Guthlac as embodying

this ideal perhaps even more than the previous saint, having a connection to animals that even Cuthbert is not shown to have: "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" (1956, 120–21). Estes (2017) argues that the natural world in the text is purely instrumental, used solely to further the narrative of the saint's spriritual purity (105). While this is certainly a valid argument for their inclusion in the narrative, I hope to draw out a few nuances that demonstrate some complexity in the ideas of human-non-human relationships in the text. Felix's depiction of Guthlac's relationship with the animals is slightly different than a simple master-servant relationship. He is described as being like a shepherd to them, an agent not only of control but also of care, feeding them from his own hand. He is further depicted as being in harmony with a pair of swallows: "without any hesitation they settled on the shoulders of the man of God Guthlac, and then chirping their little songs they settled on his arms, his knees, and his breast" (1956, 122–23). His guest is astonished at this display, and Guthlac's response is curious in light of the author's apparent focus on the dominion of holy men over the natural world: "Have you not read how if a man is joined to God in purity of spirit, all things are united to him in God? and he who refuses to be acknowledged by men seeks the recognition of wild beasts and the visitations of angels; for he who is often visited by men cannot be often visited by angels" (1956, 122–23). This suggests that the spiritual state of salvation and sainthood reunites the human with both God and the natural world that God created, and also suggests that this is the ideal state of being. He then further implies that the natural world occupied by "wild beasts" is closer to the domain of angels than the world of human society, thus appearing to elevate the spiritual significance of this natural world. The states of unity and hierarchy appear simultaneously in Felix's account; Guthlac does express command over his environment and the organisms within it, but he is also portrayed as being in unity with created things at all levels of the ecosystem because of his pure spiritual state.

Guthlac is intimately aware of his position within both his physical environment and the spiritual realm, including how the latter determines the former in Christian theology. Unique to Felix's account is the episode where the evil spirits take on the appearance of wild animals to threaten the saint: "a roaring lion fiercely threatened to tear him with its bloody teeth: then a bellowing bull dug up the earth with its hoofs and drove its gory horn into the ground; or a bear, gnashing its teeth . . . a serpent, too, rearing its scaly neck, disclosed the threat of its black poison" (Colgrave 1956, 114–15). Guthlac is not fooled, and understands that these are mere "phantoms" and "feigned deceits"

rather than real animals (114–17). He chastises Satan for the deceit and for now imitating beasts when once he had been close to God as an angel (116–17). Guthlac's response succinctly articulates ideas about spiritual hierarchies, effects of the Fall, and the divine grace of saints. Firstly, the idea of an ideal hierarchy remains with God above all, reaching down through angels to men and to beasts. Satan's fall is seen here as a loss of hierarchy; from a being lesser only to God, he is now forced to imitate wild beasts. Secondly, we can see the threat that the natural world can pose to humanity in a post-Fall world—lions, bears, and snakes are threats to human survival. One of the defining effects of the Fall in early medieval theology was a reversal in hierarchy, in power structure. Where before man had been created to live in harmony with his environment, in a postlapsarian world the natural environment held power over humanity; nature became a threat (Neville 2006, 19–20). Bede writes in his commentary on Genesis that after the original sin the earth was cursed to produce thorns, poisonous plants and barren trees as a reminder of humanity's crime and as a punishment for it (Kendall 2008, 135). As we saw earlier with Cuthbert, saints express a possible reversal of this process, and a return to a prelapsarian ideal. Guthlac is able to spot the deception and to feel no fear from these apparent beasts because he is firm in the belief that they are no threat to the spiritually pure. These fake animals are not responding to the saint in the way that they ought to, with obedience and without threat, so Guthlac sees that they are false. The holy Christian's safety from dangerous animals is a trope that is found much more widely throughout early Christian literature (Alexander 2008, 20). In the Bible, one of the signs of a true follower of Christ is their ability to handle serpents safely (Mark 16:18 [RHE]). Thus Guthlac embodies many of the prevalent beliefs in early medieval theology about the relationship between man and nature, yet it is clear even here that belief in man's dominion is not simple and straightforward. Hierarchy is only one element in a complex belief system, which itself may be interpreted in various ways. What is clear from this text is that dominion is not necessarily tyranny but can be a means to harmony.

Conclusion

These brief textual examples at first glance appear fairly conventional and straightforward; they are not accounts of Christian "radicals" as White (1996) takes St Francis to be. They also occur within a much shorter time period and in a single geographical location. Yet by examining these texts more closely it can be seen that they express the complexity of ideas involved in the doctrine of man's dominion over the earth. In early medieval thought, the natural environment was often perceived as a threat to human survival; the natural world often has power and agency, but a power that often serves to make humanity vulnerable.[2] Stories about these saints' relationships to nature

serve to articulate the recovery of an ideal, which can be seen in simple terms as a dominion that comes with a duty of care. The expression of the human "right" to colonize and dominate the non-human exists alongside a belief in the ideal of unity and harmony between the two. In these early medieval texts, this ideal is achieved through a level of spiritual purity that brings the human saint awareness of their role in both the cosmos and their local environment. The saints' spiritual authority is what grants them dominion in the natural world, but this comes with a responsibility to consider the needs of those under them. The tension and complexity of the dominion-stewardship equation found in these texts echoes many of the ideas about human "right" versus "responsibility" that persist today. Through study of these texts in their own context and on their own terms, we are able to achieve a more nuanced view of the history of environmental thought and further understand the longevity of some of the ethical questions surrounding environmental approaches today. This offers both a challenge to conventional narratives of environmental history and a re-evaluation of the complexity of the relationship between the physical world and human spirituality. In many ways, this long-term view is integral to a greater understanding of the environmental perspectives that exist today in all their diversity and difficulty, an understanding which may have the potential to reorient change in a culturally sensitive manner.

Notes

[1] For a general overview see Nardizzi (2013). For an overview of ecocriticism in Anglo-Saxon studies, see Estes (2017, 27–31).

[2] While in modern Western society, it is now humanity that is typically perceived as the threat, the early medieval perspective might perhaps be closer to what we might find in an area under continual threat of natural "disaster" events.

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