Pictorial Lives of Saints – Illustration or Adaptation?

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Kathryn Gerry holds a PhD in medieval art history and has published on illuminated saints' lives and other topics related to the cult of saints. Much of her work has been object-based, examining the roles of materials and physical structures in our understanding of images, and her current projects draw on eco-critical studies. Her research has been supported by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the School of Advanced Study at the University of London. She has held full-time curatorial and academic positions at the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, the University of Kansas, the Memphis College of Art, and Bowdoin College, and currently works in museum education and outreach at Bowdoin. She is working on a book on the Pictorial Life of St Alban in Dublin, Trinity College MS 177, with a particular focus on the representation of place within the images.

Medieval Europeans quickly figured out that manuscript copies of saints' *Lives* were much more captivating if they included pictures—even when they were made for the *literati*—and copies of saints' *Lives* adorned with series of images began to appear, mostly in association with Benedictine monasteries, in the tenth century. The surviving illuminated saints' *Lives* have provided fascinating material for historians of art, literature, and religion, even decades before Francis Wormald coined the term "illustrated *libellus*" in his seminal 1952 publication.[1] The images in these manuscripts are largely understood to be "illustrations"—colorful (though not always in full color!) adjuncts to the story that sometimes enhance meaning, but stick pretty close to the text.[2] Today, we mostly encounter illustrations in children's books or textbooks, so we often tend to think of them as helpful and enjoyable, but not necessarily integral parts of a text. But was this true in the Middle Ages? Are there some cases where we might consider the images in manuscripts to take precedence over words? Maybe even to be a distinct version of the story in their own right?

Guthlac takes leave of his military companions. From the archive of the British Library (Harley Roll Y 6, Roundel 2)

The Guthlac Roll, made at Crowland Abbey in England, c. 1200, proves that this could sometimes be the case.[3] Now kept at the British Library with the shelfmark MS Harley Roll Y 6, the Guthlac Roll is a parchment scroll about 285 cm long and 16 cm wide, unfurling horizontally to reveal a series of roundels depicting the *Life* of St Guthlac, who had established himself as an anchorite on Crowland, a small island in the fens of what is today Lincolnshire.

About a generation after Guthlac died in 714, an account of his *Life* was written by Felix, an otherwise unknown author, in Latin prose, and this was followed by a handful of texts, some of which follow Felix's account closely, for example an Old English prose *Life* composed c. 900, and others that strike different chords, like the two poetic texts in Old English known as Guthlac A and Guthlac B.[4] Several significant versions of the story were penned in the Anglo-Norman period, including an account commissioned from Orderic Vitalis, an abbreviated version of which was incorporated into his c. 1120 *Historia Ecclesiastica*. While Orderic's account was largely based on Felix's text, it contains significant departures. In the early thirteenth century, Henry of Avranches composed a poetic Anglo-Latin Life, and this, too, contains notable departures from, and additions to, the basic story as established by Felix. It is important to take note of these various texts because like each of them, the pictorial account in the Guthlac Roll is largely based on Felix, but includes a number of details and emphases that do not align entirely with Felix or any of the other known textual accounts. That is, the Guthlac Roll presents its own purely pictorial version of the story.

The Guthlac Roll today is fragmentary, with a series of 18 and a half roundels surviving on a scroll made from several sheets of parchment affixed to each other at their ends. The final roundel in the series is a fitting end to the story (and the much shorter span of this last strip of parchment suggests that it was made to fit exactly), so the end of the scroll as we have it today is most likely as it was when it was first made. It is from the start of the scroll that we are missing material, including half of what is presently the first roundel in the series. Based on the average number of roundels per strip of parchment and where the story picks up, it is likely that we are missing at least 3 or 4 roundels, and possibly more. The extant roundels contain a few Latin inscriptions identifying characters, but no verses or longer descriptive passages, and certainly no portions of any textual account of the saint. We cannot rule out the possibility that some textual material has been lost from the start of the scroll, but there is also no suggestion of any such text nor any reason to suspect that there was. If anything, the unusual choice of a horizontal scroll suggests that the makers of the Guthlac Roll had something unusual in mind.

Of course, pictorial accounts of saints and biblical figures exist in other media, where we would not usually expect much text. For this reason, stained glass windows are sometimes called "the Bibles of the Poor," although it is questionable that anyone would have been able to make sense of these narratives if they did not already know the story well or have a canon, monk, or other learned person on hand to help guide them through the narrative.[5] Perhaps it is in part because of this association between stained glass and pictorial narrative that it has sometimes been suggested that the Guthlac Roll might have been a planning sketch for a stained glass window or a piece of metal work, like a reliquary decorated with enamel roundels. Other than the fact that the object is unusual, there is nothing to suggest that it was a

Guthlac is laid out for burial. From the archive of the British Library (Harley Roll Y 6, Roundel 16)

sketch for something else. As Richard Marks has noted, the inscriptions don't really line up with contemporary stained glass composition.[6] More importantly, the level of finish is comparable to other examples of tinted line drawing, with heavily inked outlines and color washes—the Guthlac Roll is not a sketch. Although the format is uncommon, a few comparative examples exist, including a mid-thirteenth-century scroll with the *Life* of St Eligius and the more famous, if more distant, Joshua Roll, made in the Byzantine Empire in the late tenth century, almost certainly for an imperial patron.[7] In fact, there is no reason that I know of to think of the Guthlac Roll as anything other than a finished series of pictures in its own right.[8]

Another series of hagiographic pictures also makes a good argument for seeing image cycles in books as their own version of the story. In the so-called Book of St Albans, a mid-thirteenth-century manuscript made at St Albans Abbey and now housed in Trinity College Dublin (MS 177), a series of images runs along the top of many of the folios, recounting the conversion and martyrdom of Alban, the martyrdoms of two of his companions, and the development of his cult as his tomb is sought out first by Germanus of Auxerre and then by King Offa of Mercia, who founds a monastery on the site (in this version of the story at least).[9] This cycle of pictures is attributed to Matthew Paris (d. 1159), the well-known monk, historiographer, hagiographer, cartographer, and artist of St Albans who also copied many of the textual components in this manuscript. Much of the content of these images is echoed in the texts that fill the folios below the images, but the pictures tell their own version of the story, weaving the late antique visit of Germanus and the early English discovery of the gravesite by Offa together with the Romano-British events of the martyrdom, in ways that sometimes align closely with the included texts, but often do not. In fact, this series of pictures is often described as part of the *Vie de Seint Auban*, the vernacular verse version of the *Life* of Alban also composed by Matthew Paris, but the pictures continue long after that text is completed in the manuscript and they carry the story forward far past the events recounted in the hagiographic poem. This apparent disjuncture between text and image can be resolved if we consider the other components of the manuscript, which include, in addition the vernacular *Vie*, two other textual versions of Alban's *Life*—one in Latin prose and one in Latin verse—along with devotional material related to the saint and charters detailing some of the claimed privileges of the abbey.[10] Alongside these other components, it becomes possible to see the pictorial *Life* as yet another version of the basic story, adding in cer-

tain details and emphases while omitting others, one complementary component of a collection of accounts of Alban compiled in a single manuscript volume.

Seeing these pictorial *Lives* of Guthlac and Alban as their own distinct versions of the stories, their own editions, gives us more material to work with as we consider how accounts of the saints change over time, how different versions reflect the concerns and priorities of different historical moments, different authors and audiences. Rather than spending our time seeing how closely such image series do or do not align with their supposed textual or pictorial exemplars, we could be adding pieces to the puzzle of cult development with these distinct and unique narratives.

Notes

[1]Francis Wormald, "Some Illustrated Manuscripts of the Lives of the Saints," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 35/1 (1952), pp 248-266; for more information on illuminated hagiographic manuscripts, see Cynthia Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart: Narrative Effect on Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[2]Merriam Webster defines illustration as "a picture or diagram that helps make something clear or attractive," (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illustration; accessed 7 August 2025).

[3]See Jane Roberts, "Guthlac on a Roll: BL, Harley MS Y.6," in *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, ed. Jane Roberts, Alan Thacker (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2020), pp 242-276.

[4]See Felix, *Life of Saint Guthlac: Texts, Translation and Notes,* ed. and trans. B. Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, repr: 1985); information about other Guthlac texts can be found in Colgrave's introduction, pp 19-25; also Jane Roberts and Alan Thacker, "Introduction to Guthlac's Life and Cult," in *Guthlac: Crowland's Saint*, pp xv-xlvi.

[5]Madeline Caviness, "Biblical Stories in Windows: Were They Bibles for the Poor?" in *The Bible in the Middle Ages: Its Influence on Literature and Art*, ed. Bernard S. Levy (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), pp 103-147.

[6]Richard Marks, *The Stained Glass of the Collegiate Church of the Holy Trinity, Tattershall* (New York: Garland, 1984), p 225.

[7]The Eligius Roll is Paris, Musée Carnavalet, D.7075, for which see Elizabeth Williams' entry in Melanie Holcomb, ed., *Pen and Parchment: Drawing in the Middle Ages* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 138, 139; a fourteenth-century *Life* of St Quentin is also known: Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS II.3189; the Joshua Roll is Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. Vat. Ms. Pal. graec. 431; see Jeffrey Anderson's entry in Helen C. Evans, William D. Wixom, eds., *Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era*, A.D. 843-1261 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1997) pp 238-240.

[8]See also Kimberly Kelly, "Forgery, Invention and Propaganda: Factors behind the Production of the Guthlac Roll (British Museum Harley Roll Y.6)," *Athanor* 8 (1989), pp 1-13.

[9]See Kathryn Gerry, "Matthew Paris' Pictorial Life of Alban," in *The Cambridge Companion to Matthew Paris*, ed. James Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026), pp 167-195.

[10]There is some evidence that this manuscript circulated among lay readers and this is sometimes offered as an explanation for the extensive pictorial content, but even if the manuscript was sometimes made available to members of the laity, the materials compiled strongly point to the monastic community as the primary audience for the book, and in the fifteenth century the manuscript was still kept at the abbey.